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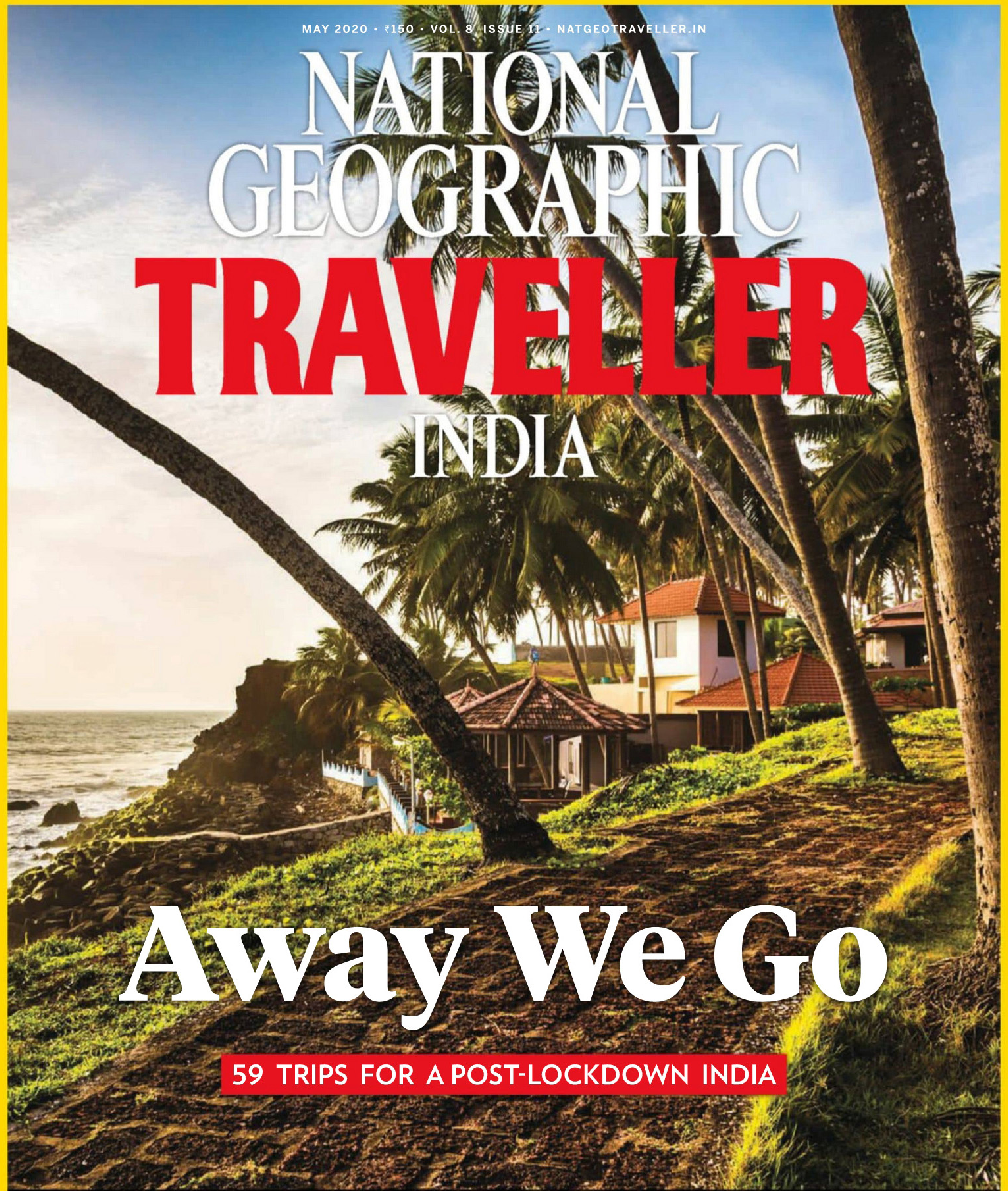
MAY 2020 • ₹150 • VOL. 8 ISSUE 11 • NATGEOTRAVELLER.IN

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER INDIA



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ON THE COVER

For lovers of the uncharted, travel is ever-present—in our lockdown breakfasts, or the post-lockdown getaway we dream of. Bike trips to staycations, here's our list of post-pandemic, travel ideas. And some blues-beating, fun things from the world at a standstill.

ABHEY SINGH/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (COVER)

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7th Floor, AFL House, Lok Bharti Complex, Marol Maroshi Road, Andheri (E), Mumbai - 400 059, India.
letters@natgeotraveller.in
RNI NO. MAHENG/2012/51060

Printed and published by Mr. Anuraag Agarwal on behalf of Amar Chitra Katha Pvt. Ltd.
Printed at Manipal Technologies Limited, Plot no 2/a, Shivalli Village, Industrial Area, Manipal-576104 and Published at Amar Chitra Katha Private Ltd., 7th Floor, AFL House, Lok Bharti Complex, Marol Maroshi Road, Andheri (E), Mumbai - 400 059, India. Published under license from National Geographic Partners, LLC.
Interim Editor-in-Chief: Lakshmi Sankaran
Processed at Commercial Art Engravers Pvt. Ltd., 386, Vir Savarkar Marg, Prabhadevi, Mumbai-400 025.

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WINNER OF THE SATTE AWARD FOR BEST TRAVEL PUBLICATION IN INDIA

LIFE BEYOND TRAVEL

12

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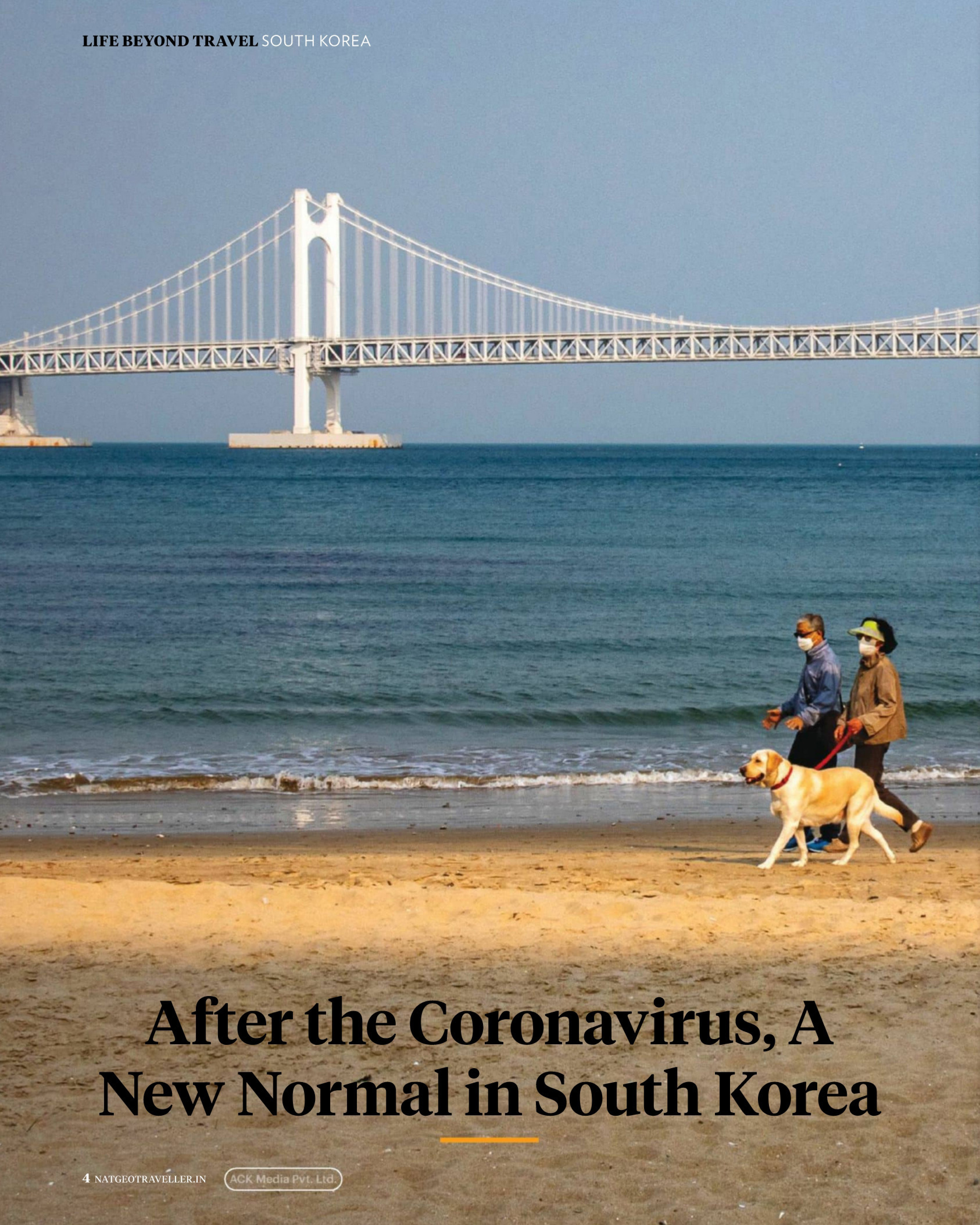


After the Coronavirus, A New Normal in South Korea

Dog walkers have returned to Gwangan beach in Busan, as South Korea relaxes some social distancing measures. Busan was one of worst-hit cities in South Korea after Daegu. Cases in the country peaked between late-February and early-March, and the national tally was 10,962 as of May 13.

AS INDIA AND MUCH OF THE WORLD REMAIN LOCKED DOWN, BUSAN IN SOUTH KOREA IS CAUTIOUSLY RETURNING OUTDOORS. AN IMMIGRANT PHOTOGRAPHER CAPTURES THE CITY POST-COVID-19

Text and Photographs by Niall Ruddy

Post-Pandemic, A City on the Mend

Until the novel coronavirus disrupted life in South Korea, artist-photographer Niall Ruddy's days began with the same, meditative ritual in his hometown of Busan. He'd get on a random bus, ride for 30-40 minutes, and get off wherever that took him. It was how he fell for the charms of Nampo with its shopping alleys, capturing the markets and traditional neighbourhoods of the wider Jung-gu area, Busan port, and working-class neighbourhoods like Jaesongdong or Daeyeon.

After COVID-19 cases overwhelmed the country in late February, and in early March, Ruddy, 36, was cooped up at home for two weeks. But with rigorous testing and contact-tracing, South Korea averted the suffering that overwhelmed China and Italy—without resorting to lockdowns. And now, as India, U.S.A., and much of Europe largely remain indoors, Busan and other South Korean cities are on the mend.*

Ruddy, an English teacher and originally from Northern Ireland, is testing out this new, post-coronavirus world with a camera in hand. He gets out much lesser than before, armed with a mask and an instinct to maintain distance, but his vibrant, chaotic city is no less interesting a subject to his lens. A quietness has descended upon Busan, bottles of hand sanitisers are everywhere, festivals and sporting events are cancelled; but Ruddy feels a frisson of pride for his adopted home. To him these are signs that people have coped and continued lives amid a global disaster, however altered they might be. "I am not surprised either—South Korea has seen great tragedy and enormous social change, only to emerge stronger every time," he notes.

For his MFA degree, Ruddy is currently working on a project that examines Busan's old traditional neighbourhoods that are disappearing amid modernisation. Although his fiancée is a Busan native, it is Ruddy who has visited areas she's never even set foot in.

"I'm from a small town of Newry in Northern Ireland, and perhaps it was growing up amid The Troubles that inspired me to look outwards," he says. After he worked in corporate banking in Dublin for five years, Ruddy began looking for a way out—an escape that could weave in more art and travel into his life. A friend of his was teaching English in South Korea at that time, and he decided to follow. In 2011, at the age of 28, the photographer moved to the city of Changwon, in the south of the peninsula. Over the next five years, Ruddy moved across different cities and small towns in Gyeongsangnam-do province. "I was experiencing so many new and complicated feelings relating to identity, displacement, the concept of home, and I could only express them through photography and art." He put down roots in Busan three years ago, and it does feel like home. "I love observing how cities operate, and for someone like that, Busan is a godsend."

**After zero cases in late April, at the time of publication on May 13 S. Korea had reported a new infection cluster originating in Seoul's nightclubs.*

코로나1
외부인의 출입을
※ 애완동물 동반

AZABU DOUGHNUT

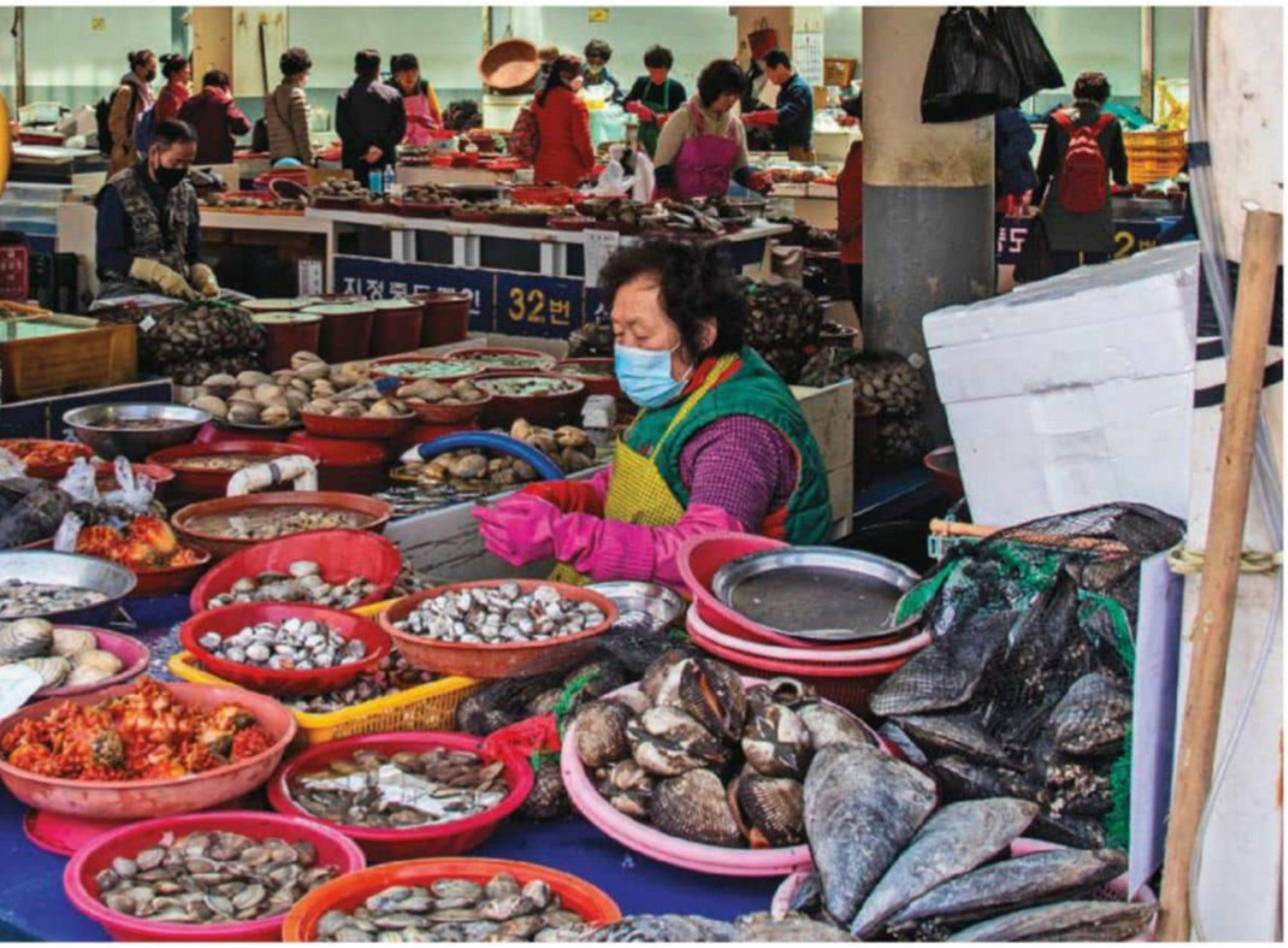
9(COVID-19) 감염 예방을 위하여
을 제한하오니, 협 하여 주시기 바랍니다.
시 출입금지

(Clockwise from top) Busan has an excellent subway system, and convenient bus and taxi services. COVID-19, however, has altered the way many people commute. It is now common to see locals cycling and walking to avoid packed trains and public transport; Three friends take a breather from shopping at the Lotte Department Store in Nampodong on a Saturday at lunchtime. The place now sees a more conservative footfall compared to pre-pandemic times; Busan Station is the gateway to the city, and commuters have fallen into the habit of social distancing on its platforms. Another significant presence are the cleaners, regularly scrubbing down the station's seating areas. Some don safety gear to spray disinfectant in every nook.

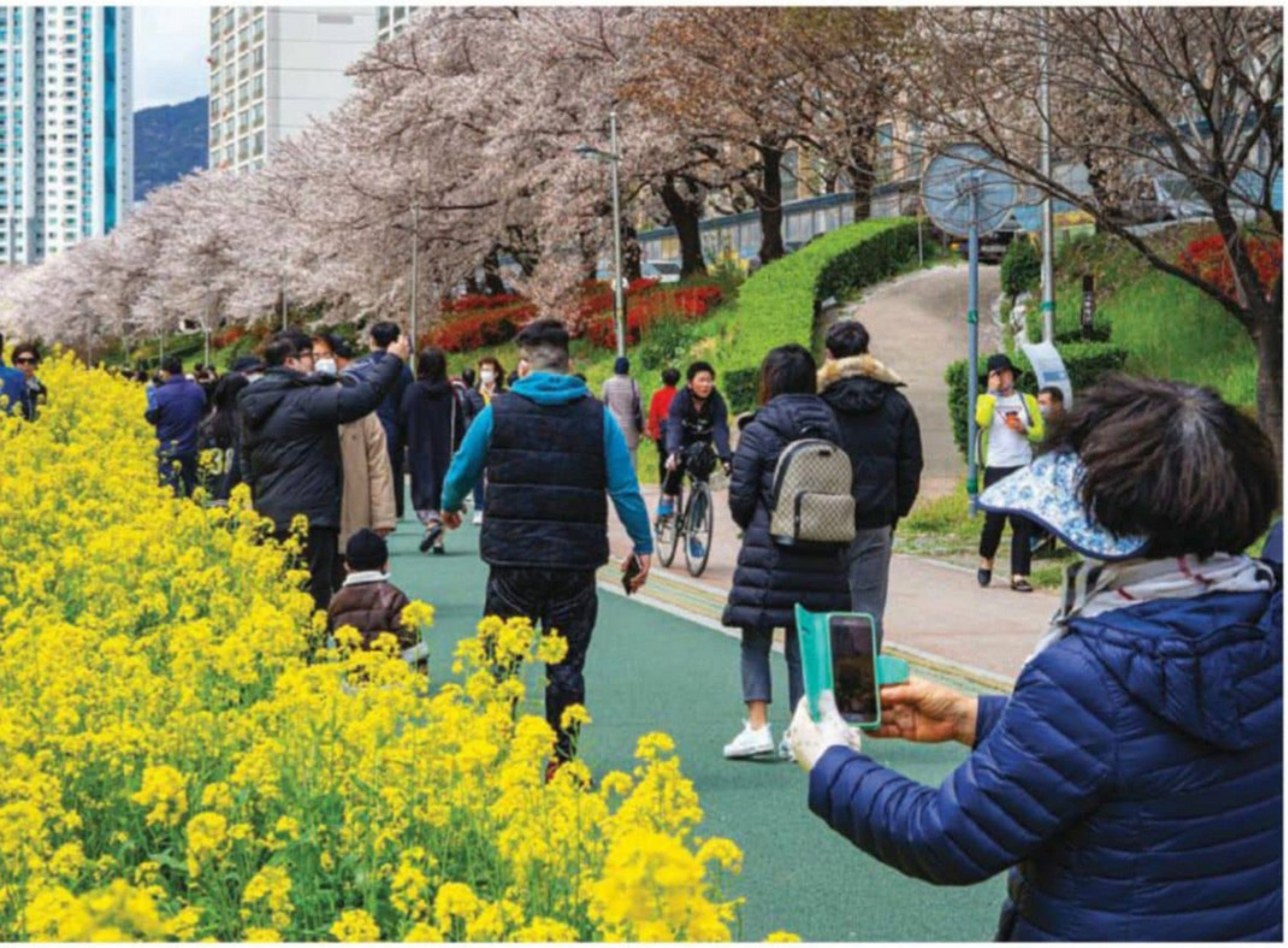
Hotto Motto

Genghis Khan
라멘
이찌방
いちばん

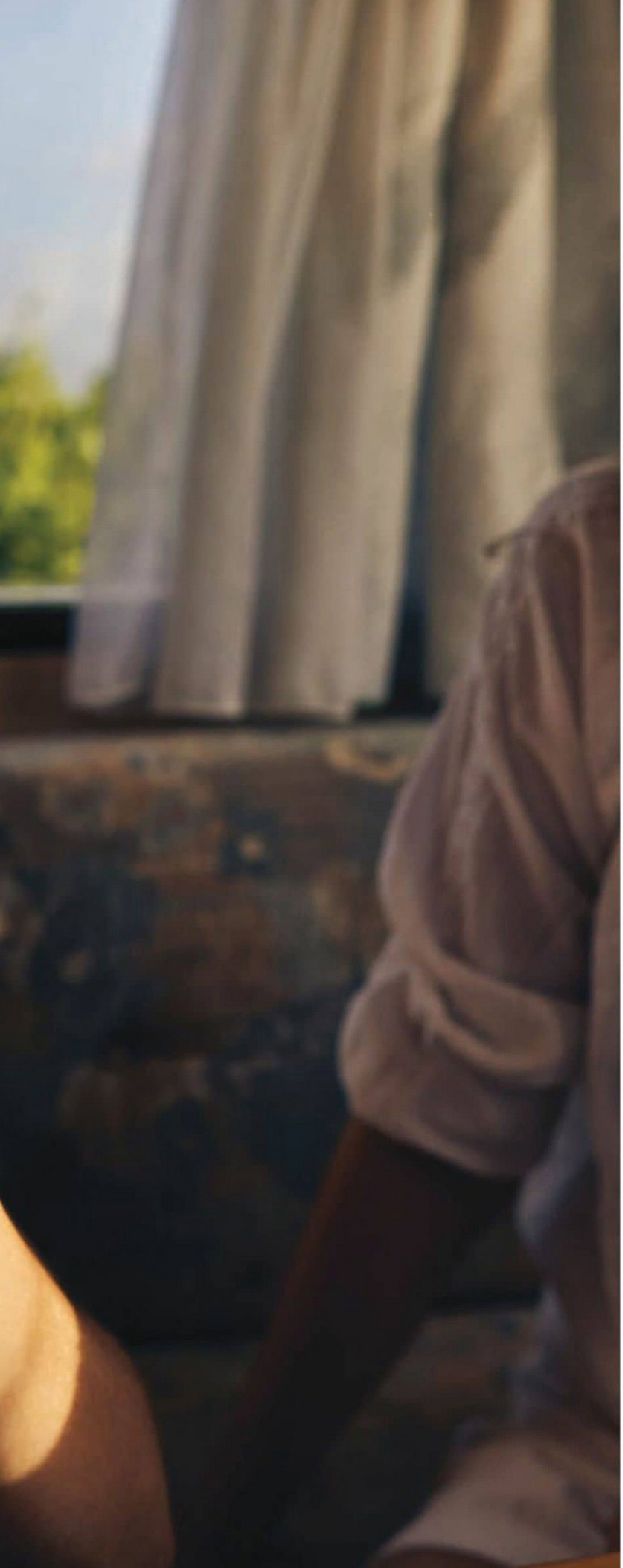
In Busan, customers have begun returning to the traditional fish market next to the port. But it has a long way to go, if you ask Nyeo YangPil, the owner of the family-run shop, Busan DdangKong. "Business is down, people aren't coming as much. I wanted to travel abroad, but I'm afraid to go anywhere."



No matter where you work, face masks and gloves have seeped into daily life almost everywhere in Busan. Bottles of hand sanitiser too are strategically placed in many public places, including the Jagalchi Fish Market (top), one of South Korea's largest; Cherry blossom season is one of the most eagerly awaited events in the country. This year, cherry blossom festivals in the city were cancelled, and it was expected that people would forgo hanami. Busanites, however, flocked to sakura trees in the Oncheon-cheon area (bottom) in considerable numbers.



In the past, the grounds and outdoor theatre of the Busan International Film Festival building rang with the laughter of children and chatter of teens on the weekends. There was a noticeable absence of play during the worst of the pandemic, but now there are signs that life is returning to something approaching normalcy.



OLIVER ROSSI/ STONE/GETTY IMAGES

Travel by Toast

IN THESE RESTRICTIVE TIMES, HERE'S A LIST OF CLASSIC BREAD-BASED PREPARATIONS THAT ARE A PORTAL TO THEIR CULINARY HOMELANDS

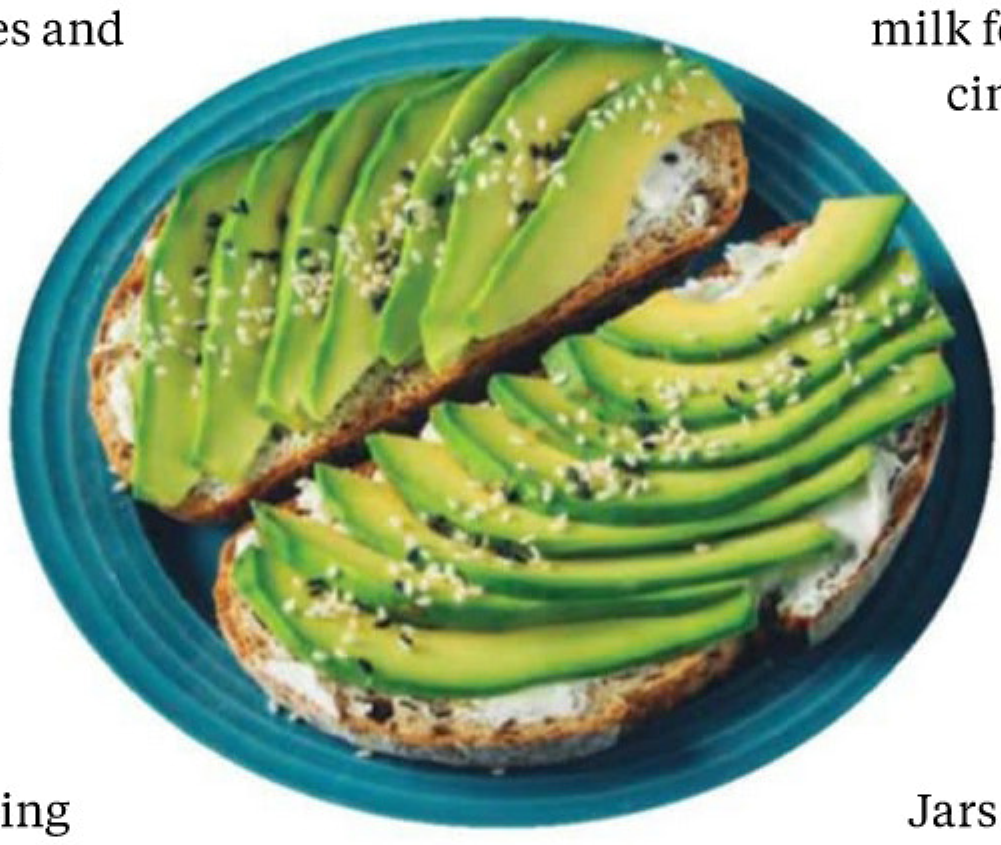
By Julian Manning

From Nutella-smeared snacks to heart breakfast concoctions, toast unites the world and is the most approachable of dishes, especially when supplies run low.

F

For most of us, the way we eat has been affected by COVID-19. During a lockdown nobody is thinking of making Julia Child's Boeuf Bourguignon or Vikas Khanna's Masala Cornish hens; if they're at all like me, they're mechanically muttering the words, "Maggi, eggs, bread, milk," while they wait in line to enter the market. Yet, even with sparse food supplies, it is possible to bring excitement into the kitchen.

For a lot of people, cooking is a form of travel. Making a meal, simple or complicated, often is about establishing a connection between peoples and cultures, whether it be fond memories of familial specialities or dreams of faraway delicacies. It's a jumble of similarities and differences, a variety of tastes and flavours, even when it concerns as straightforward a starting point as plain, old toast.



Bring On The Bread

Bread, in some form or another, is eaten by almost all communities around the globe. Even during this crisis, people waking up in Malaysia start their day with a smear of kaya, a luscious, buttery coconut jam spread on airy toast, while in Morocco, a golden, honey-infused mixture is still drizzled upon thick slices of warm bread in the morning. You too, can wake up like a Malaysian or Moroccan for a day. All you need is a bit of bread, plus a few additional ingredients, some readily available during the lockdown in India, and others perhaps gathering dust in your pantry.

For the recipes go to: www.natgeotraveller.in/travel-by-toast-27- ways-to-make-breakfast-from-around-the-world

French Toast

This classic actually dates back all the way to the Roman Empire to a first century A.D. recipe book, *Apicius*. In France, this dish is known as "pain perdu," which means "lost bread," referring to the use of stale bread that was rejuvenated after soaking in milk and eggs before it was fried. While many modern-day recipes call for ingredients like cinnamon, nutmeg, and maple syrup, in its essence French toast merely requires milk, eggs, and bread... and, of course, a knob of butter.

Rabanadas

These are a version of French toast that originated in Portugal and are very popular in Brazil. Just swap out the milk for good ol' red wine and add a bit of cinnamon.

Egg with a Hat or Egg in a Hole

Cut a circular hole in a slice of bread, throw it on a buttery frying pan, and crack an egg into the centre to experience this two-in-one American breakfast combo.

Kaya Toast

Jars of already made kaya will be hard to

IRINA SOKOLOVSKAYA/SHUTTERSTOCK
FACING PAGE: EKATERINA KONDRATOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK (PÂTÉ), EDUCATION IMAGES/CONTRIBUTOR/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES (BOULANGERIE), KARINRIN/SHUTTERSTOCK (FRENCH TOAST), LAURIPATTERSON/E+/GETTY IMAGES (EGG TOAST)

Be it smeared with pâté (top left) or avocados (facing page, inset), served up in a boulangerie (top right) or a frying pan (bottom right), toast is enjoyed so many different ways around the world, especially in its fluffy French Toast avatar (bottom left).

While bruschetta (top) is most commonly eaten in Italy as an antipasto, the gooey, coconut jam wonder that is kaya toast (bottom) dominates the Malaysian breakfast table.

come by in India. However, you can make the kaya from scratch. The ingredients of this coconut jam, which originated in Malaysia, are relatively accessible, and the end product is a silky, buttery gold sweet mixture that elevates everyday morning toast to no end.

Toast Skagen

This Swedish snack is not that tough if you have access to fresh or frozen prawns, mayo, and mustard (feel free not to garnish with fish roe). Think of it like a prawn cocktail on butter toast.

Pan con Tomate

This simple Spanish treat requires minimal ingredients for a boatload of flavour. The dish typically calls for ciabatta bread, but you can substitute with regular sliced bread, or you can attempt to make the aforementioned soda bread (or a ciabatta recipe if you are feeling ambitious) should you want to use a base with more structure and texture.

Bruschetta

This Italian toast (similar to *pan con tomate*) is as popular as it is tasty. If you don't have ingredients like balsamic vinegar and basil in the kitchen, just omit them from the recipe. Substitute the baguette for regular sliced bread or soda bread.

Baked Beans on Toast

A can of beans and a slice of toast, what could be more English? If you have some sausages, bacon, and a fresh tomato, you could turn this into a filling fry-up.

Pan de Dulce de Leche

You won't be disappointed if you make this legendary sweet sauce, of Argentinean origin, from scratch. Although it involves a bit of technique, it is possible to make this thick, caramel-coloured sauce two ways with minimal and accessible ingredients. One method requires milk, sugar, baking soda, and a drop of vanilla extract, while the other just requires condensed milk, water, and an oven.

Bombay Toast

The difference between French toast and this is that the latter should be fried crisp, giving it a completely different texture. Also, this toast is inherently sweet, unlike French toast which has sweetness added to it after the toast is made.

Amlou on Toast

To make this classic Moroccan breakfast you require argan oil, almonds, a tad of honey, and a food processor—unless you have Popeye-sized forearms and a mortar and pestle. You do not require an oven to toast the almonds for the Amlou dip, and can use a pan on a stovetop instead.

Avo Toast

This Instagram-famous breakfast item has been around in some form or another for centuries, from its Aztec Empire origin in modern-day Mexico to the decks of British Colonial ships, where it was referred to as "Alligator pear." This dish is remarkably simple to make, the only challenge is finding avocados. Although fancy

UDITH HAEUSLER/ CULTURA/GETTY IMAGES (BRUSCHETTA), JONATHAN SIEGEL/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (KAYA TOAST)

grocers most likely have dwindling supplies and high prices, some local fruit and vegetable markets have domestic vendors of this buttery fruit.

Croque Monsieur

For this French classic, just make cheese toast with ham (use any frozen ham available in the market) and pretend this is not a sandwich or you can make them open-faced toasts. There is no need to use fancy cheeses, like gruyere, to make this, but do try and make the simple bechamel sauce for some extra gooey goodness. This only requires butter, flour, and milk (no need to add nutmeg if there is none in the kitchen).

Eggs Kejriwal

This 1960s classic from Mumbai's posh Willingdon Sports Club adds a little spice to a great egg-based snack, preferably perched on a slice of buttered toast or pav.

Hagelslag

The name of this famous Dutch breakfast means hailstorm, referring to the mound of sugar sprinkles it requires. The toast looks like something Will Ferrell would eat in the movie *Elf*— it only calls for butter, bread, and sprinkles (preferably chocolate, although any will work). This breakfast may seem strange, but your inner five-year-old might be in dire need of this kind of cheering up right now, so might as well give it a try.

Zapiekanka

Zapiekanki (plural) are a popular street food in Polish cities. All one needs is bread, cheese (any kind that melts well), mushrooms, and ketchup. No need to go for the traditional baguette, sliced bread works as well. If you don't have an oven, just toast the bread in a pan, sauté the mushrooms in another pan, and occasionally use the pan lid to cover the cheese on top of the toast so it melts.

Nori Tama Toast

If you happen to have any seaweed at home, lay it down on a piece of toast covered with melted cheese, sautéed spring (or regular) onions, and a crumbled boiled egg to complete this Japanese café favourite.

Smore Toast

If you have Nutella, graham crackers, and a bag of marshmallows in your pantry, you can stuff yourself on this American campfire favourite for breakfast.

Chicken Liver Toast

If you have plenty of butter and chicken livers you have all you need for this epically decadent French option. Add in some red onion, garlic, thyme, and olive oil, and you have plenty of flavour to make a prolific chicken liver pâté.

Toast Hawaii

Believe it or not, this very American sounding pineapple toast is a German favourite from a time when this kind of breakfast seemed exotic and not utterly questionable. No need to use fancy cheese, any standard cheese slices will do. ▮

SARA WINTER/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES PLUS/GETTY IMAGES (BUTTER TOAST), GALLO IMAGES/CONTRIBUTOR/GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (COOKIE BUTTER TOAST), GBRUNDIN/ROYALTY-FREE/GETTY IMAGES (TOAST WITH PRAWN)

Toasts represent so many different tastes from around the world; The Dutch pour sprinkles over butter toast (top), the Belgians slather cookie butter on it (middle), and the Swedes create a stylish prawn dish (bottom) with it.

Himraj Soin

A drone shot of the otherwise buzzing New Delhi reveals the city's quieter and greener side. These are unprecedented and challenging times. The streets are empty except for a lone vehicle on the move and people have resorted to staying put.

A Room With A View

FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS WHO, UNTIL RECENTLY, TRAVELLED THE WORLD IN SEARCH OF INSPIRATION, THE LOCKDOWN PROVIDES ANOTHER SOURCE OF CREATIVITY

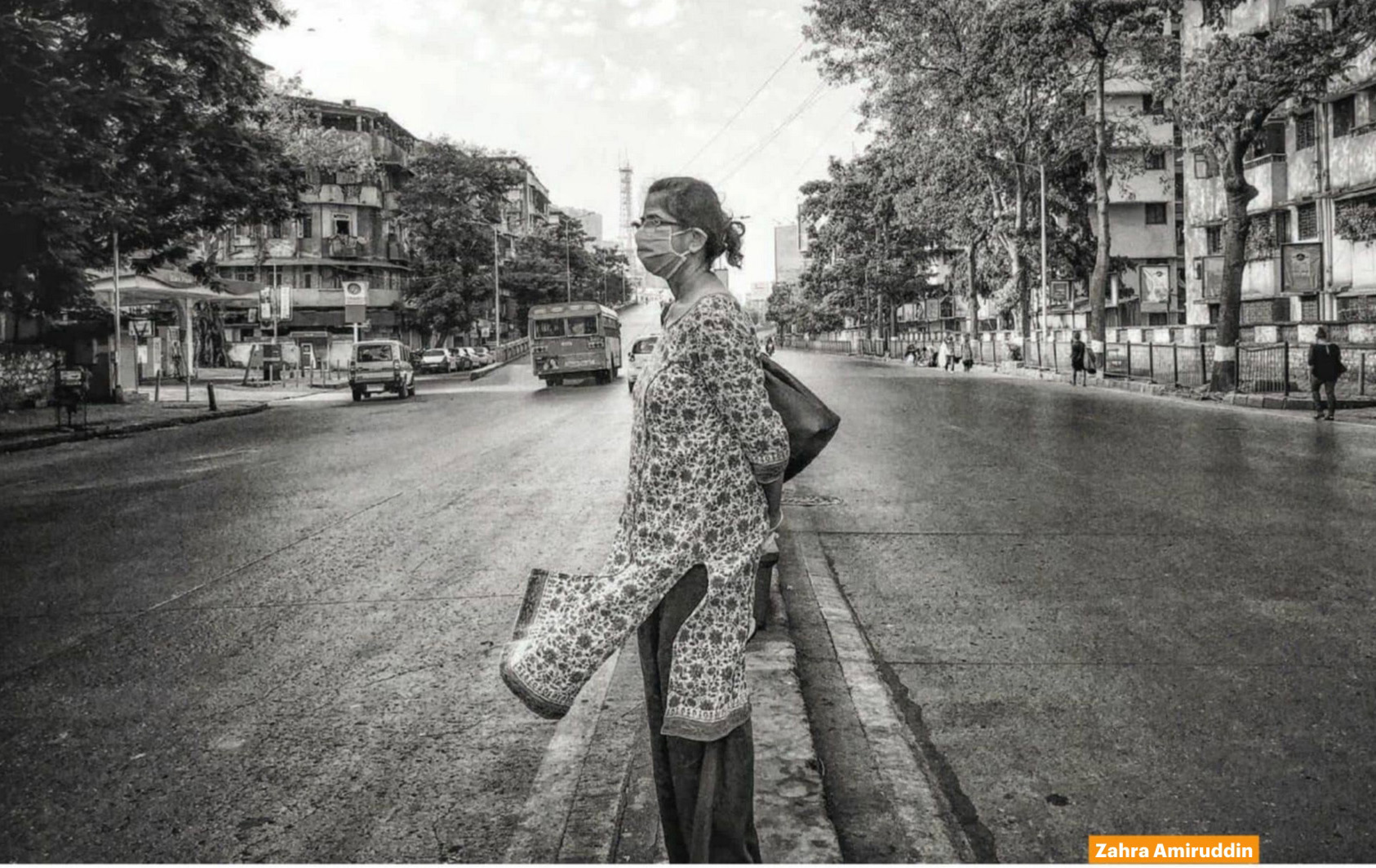
With borders closed, restaurants shuttered and flights grounded, the coronavirus pandemic has forced civilians to remain homebound. In the interim, the internet has thrown open its doors to virtual tours and prompts to challenge and boost productivity. Many are putting their solitude to good use by sharpening up a sketch pencil, laying out a yoga mat or picking up a camera.

Cultivating a sense of creativity during the pandemic is more than just the concept of keeping busy, it's nurturing one's sense of imagination, which seems to be a pretty useful asset during a lockdown. We happen to know a few photographers across the country, many of them who, up until recently, travelled quite a bit for their work. Now, even with their proverbial wings cut off, these photographers are still capturing remarkable moments in their lives, be it a striking scene on the way to get groceries or a mesmerising moment at home. Even when circumstances look as if they will constrain the way these creative folks express themselves, it appears to do nothing but widen their perspective and sharpen their focus.

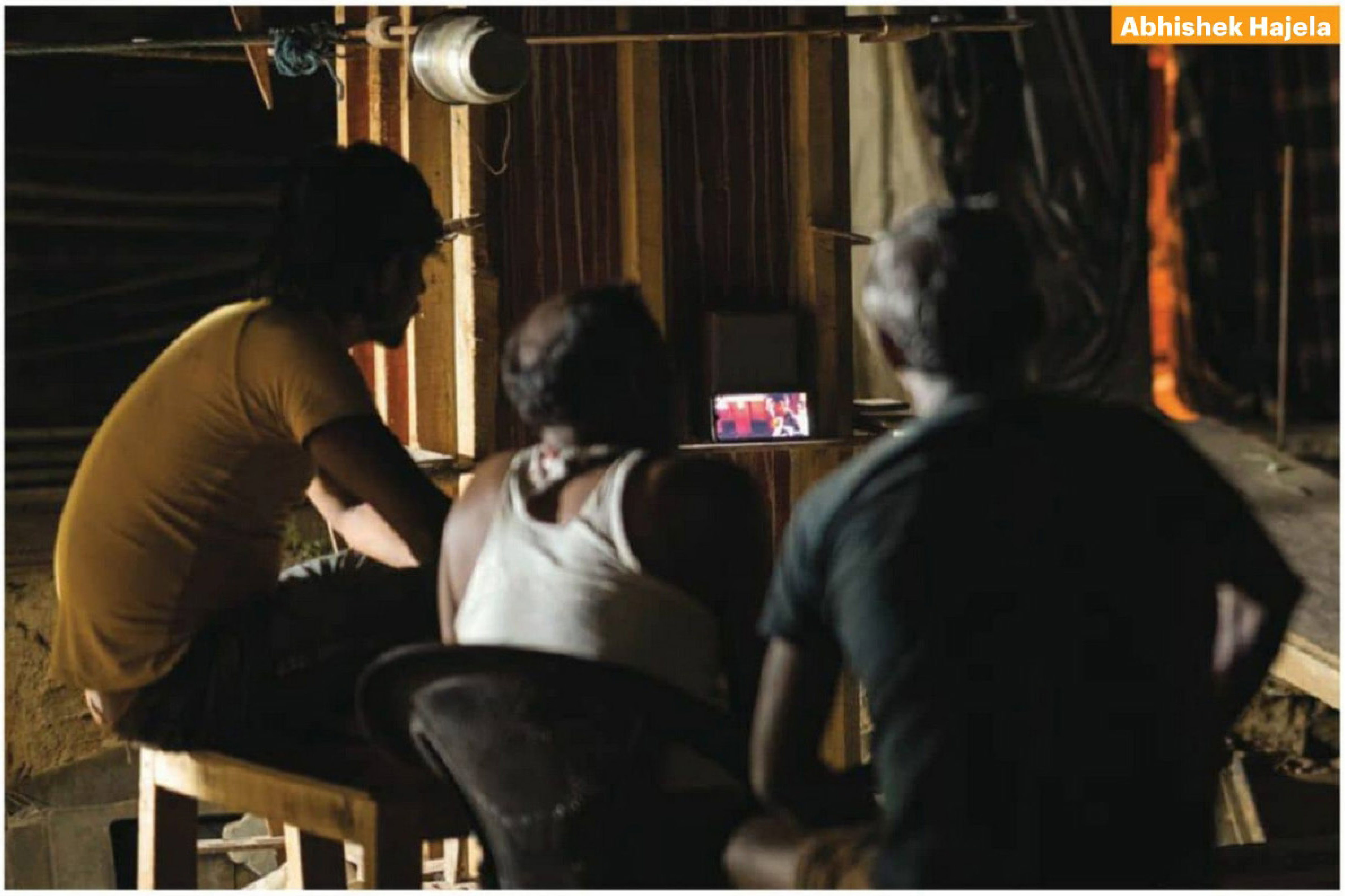
A father and son (top) play on their terrace as dusk takes over the Mumbai skyline. Even amidst a national lockdown, the pandemic can't stop this moment of quality family time; Normal activities such as shopping for groceries and basic supplies have now become a rarity. Bustling streets have been replaced with a smattering of watchful eyes, masked faces (bottom), and gloved hands.

Avani Rai

Ajatshatru Singh

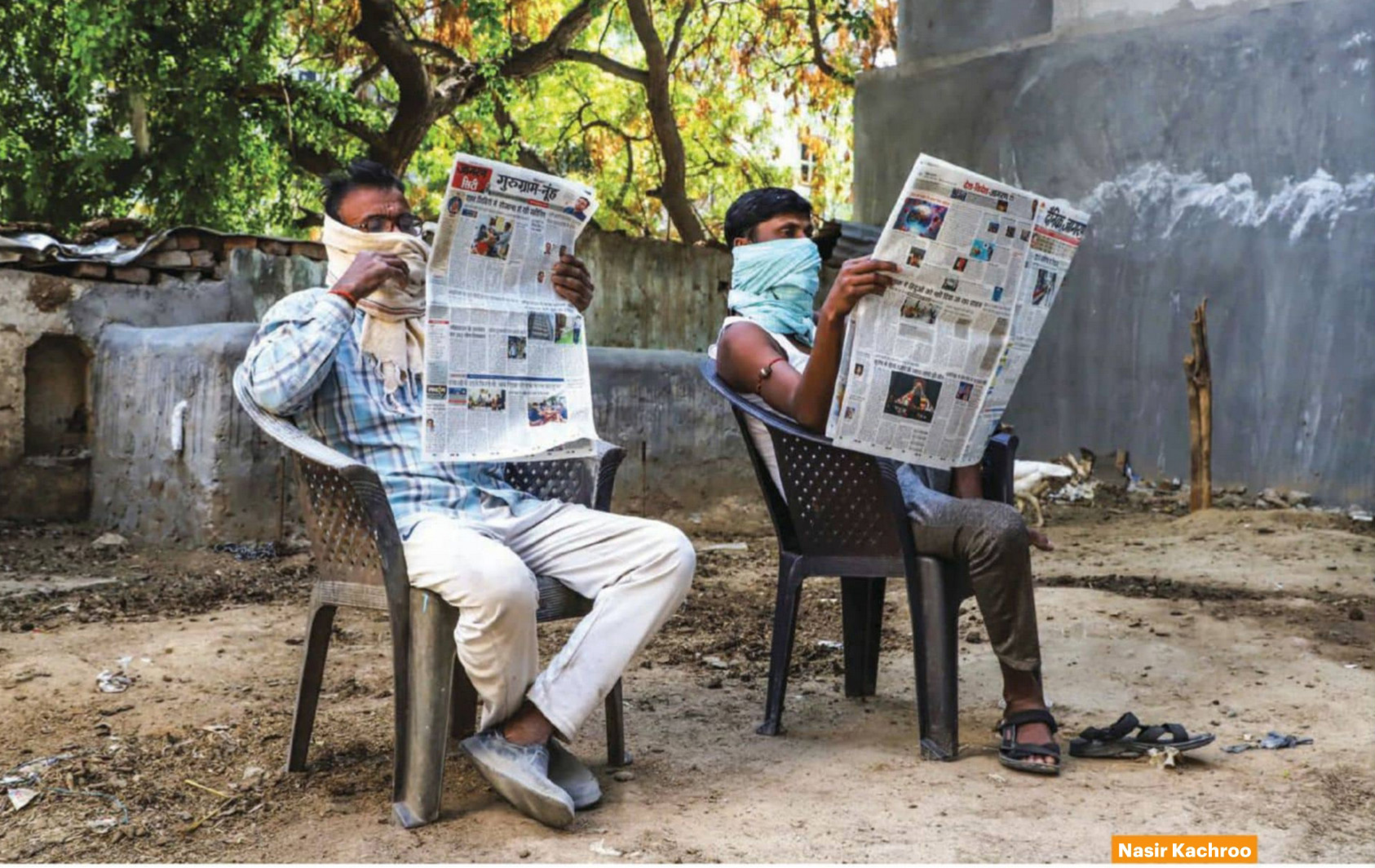


Zahra Amiruddin

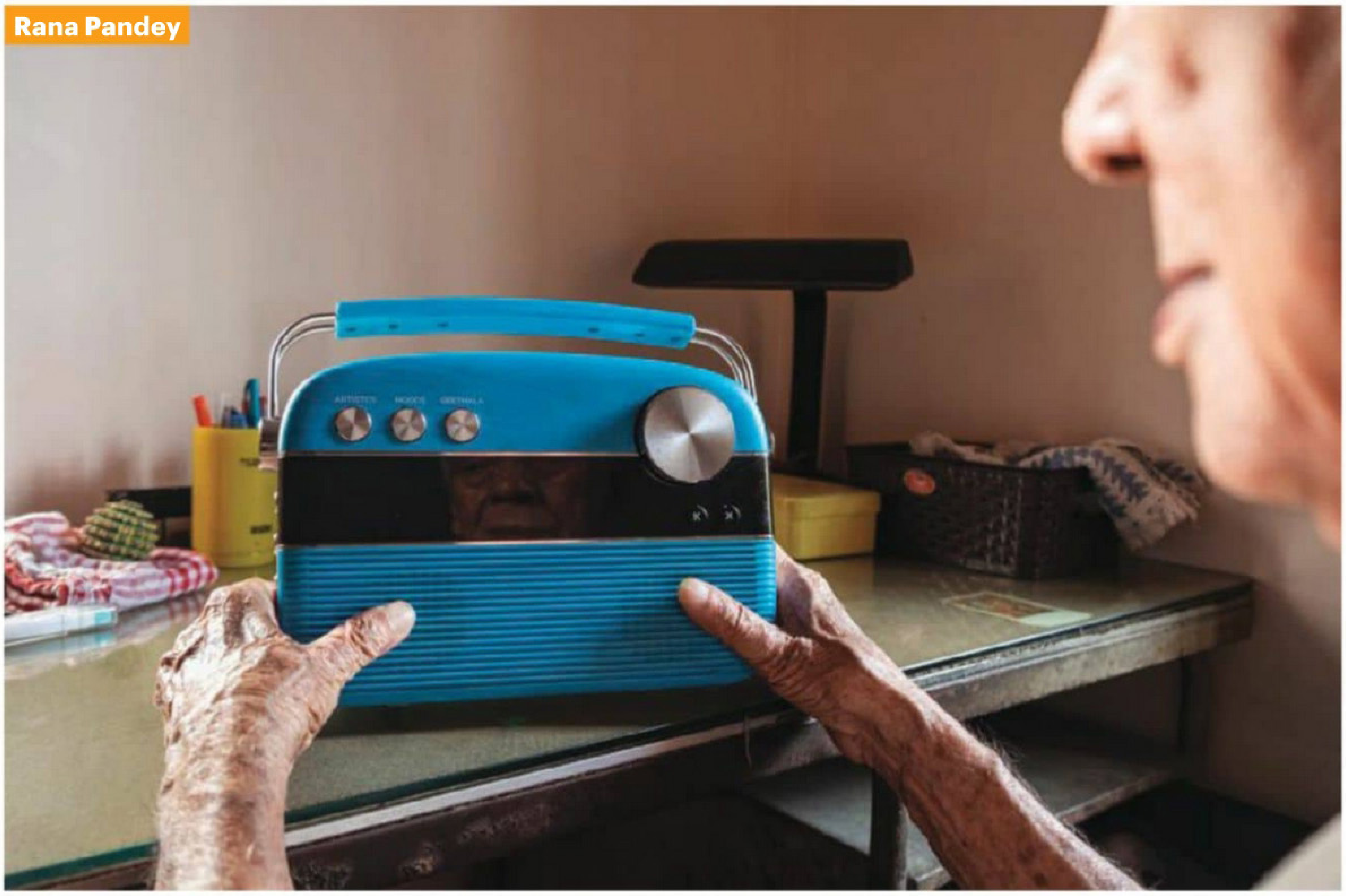


Abhishek Hajela

As our lives have changed with the pandemic, so have our neighbourhoods. Mumbai's Byculla area (top), which has always been brimming with heavy traffic and pedestrians, now appears eerily dystopian; Every evening, construction workers (bottom) and their families staying in isolation at a construction site in South Delhi gather around a mobile phone to watch Bhojpuri movies, their only source of entertainment.



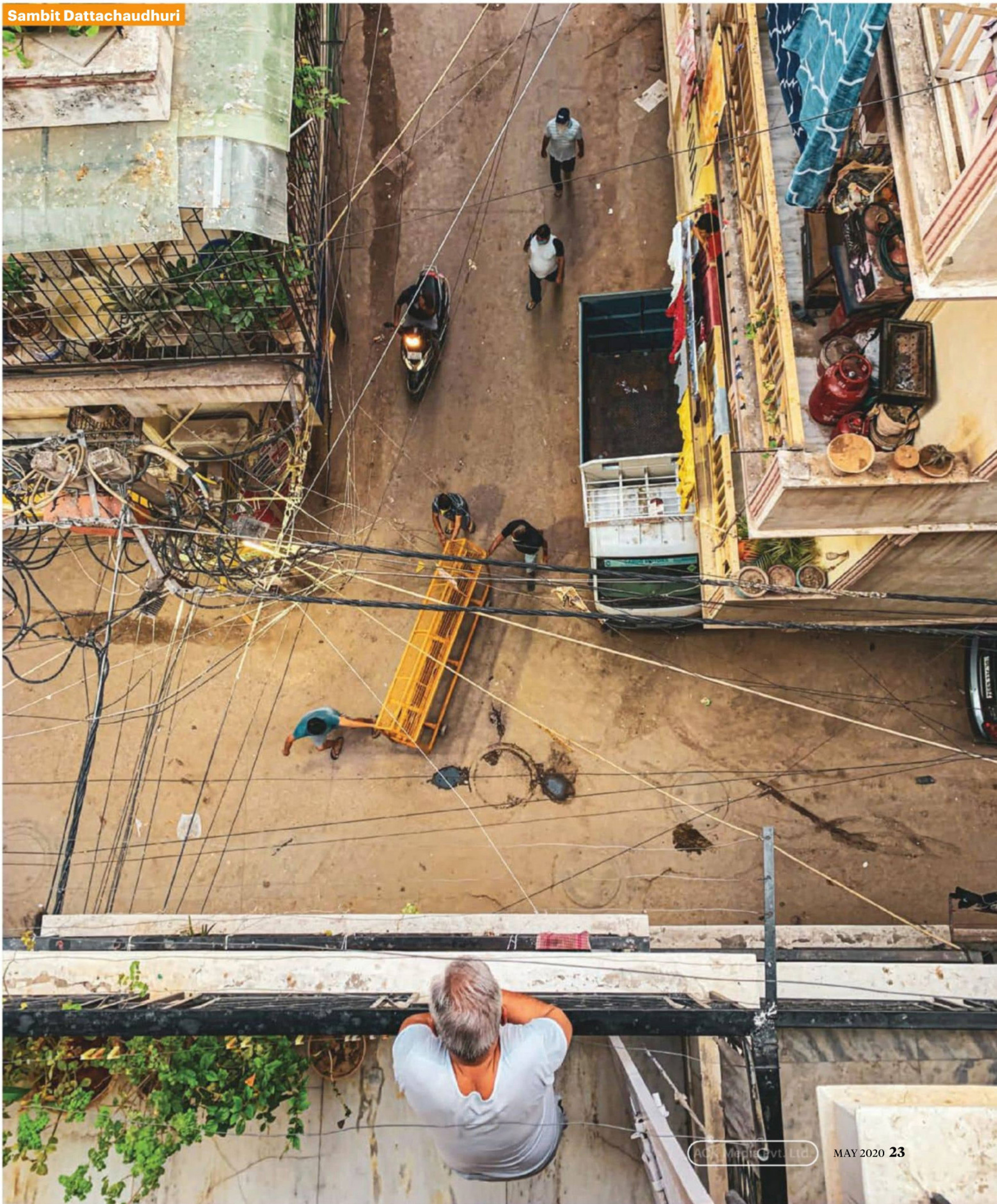
Nasir Kachroo



Rana Pandey

Bhola and Rakesh (top) scour the newspapers for stories detailing the plight of thousands of migrant workers, like themselves, across India. They provide the only source of income to their kin; Photographer Rana Pandey's 91 year-old grandfather loves spending his time listening to his Caravan radio (bottom). Except for the absence of his early morning and evening walks, his daily routine remains unaffected.

South Delhi's Khirki Extension, once packed with movement, has now turned into a containment zone. Only a handful of stores that sell essential supplies remain open for a few hours everyday. Barricades are put in place to restrict movements. Residents seek out terraces under open skies.



Sambit Dattachaudhuri

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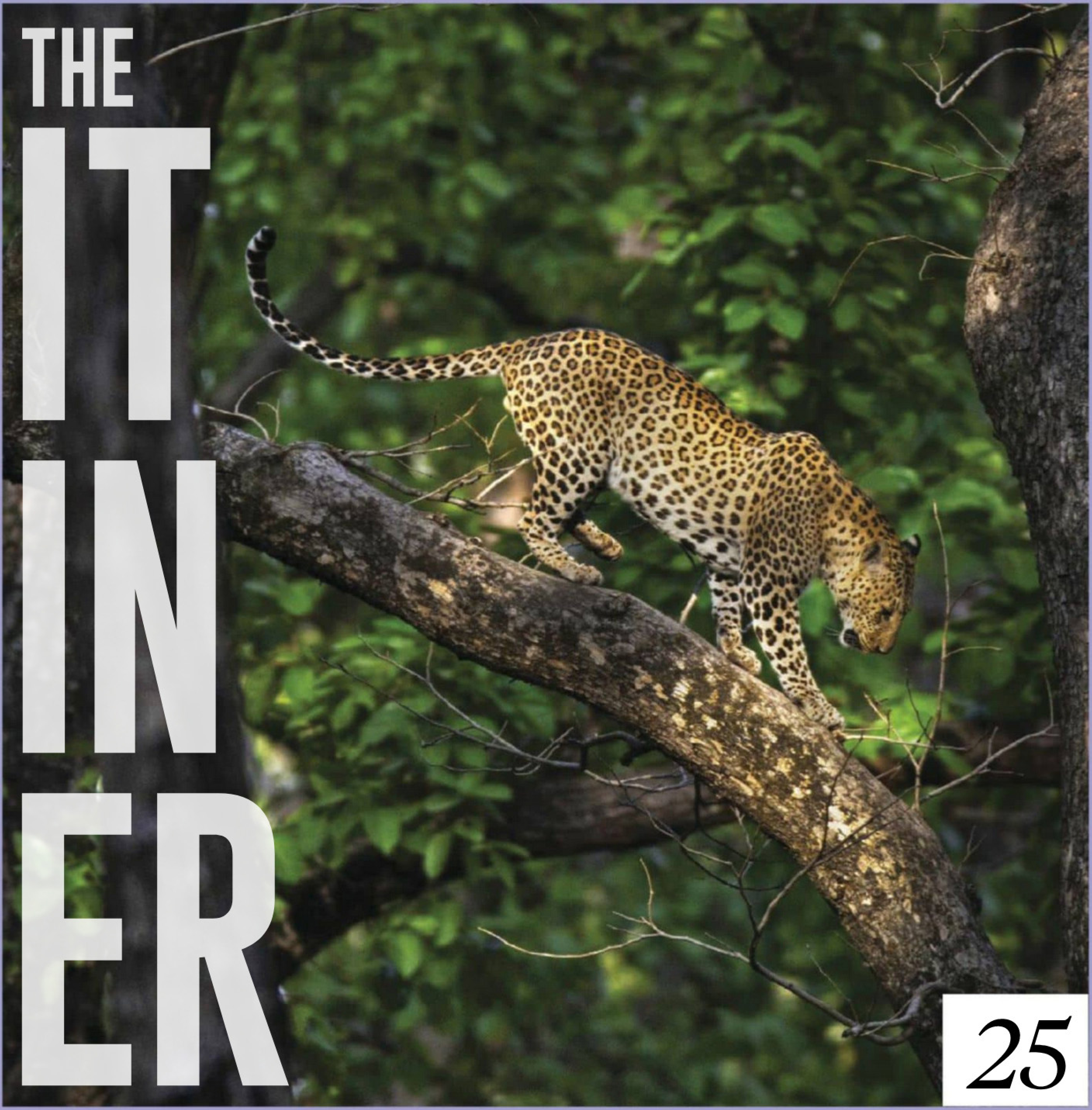
THE ITINERARY



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SANTANU BANIK/SHUTTERSTOCK

25 IN KANHA NATIONAL PARK, A WOMAN IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

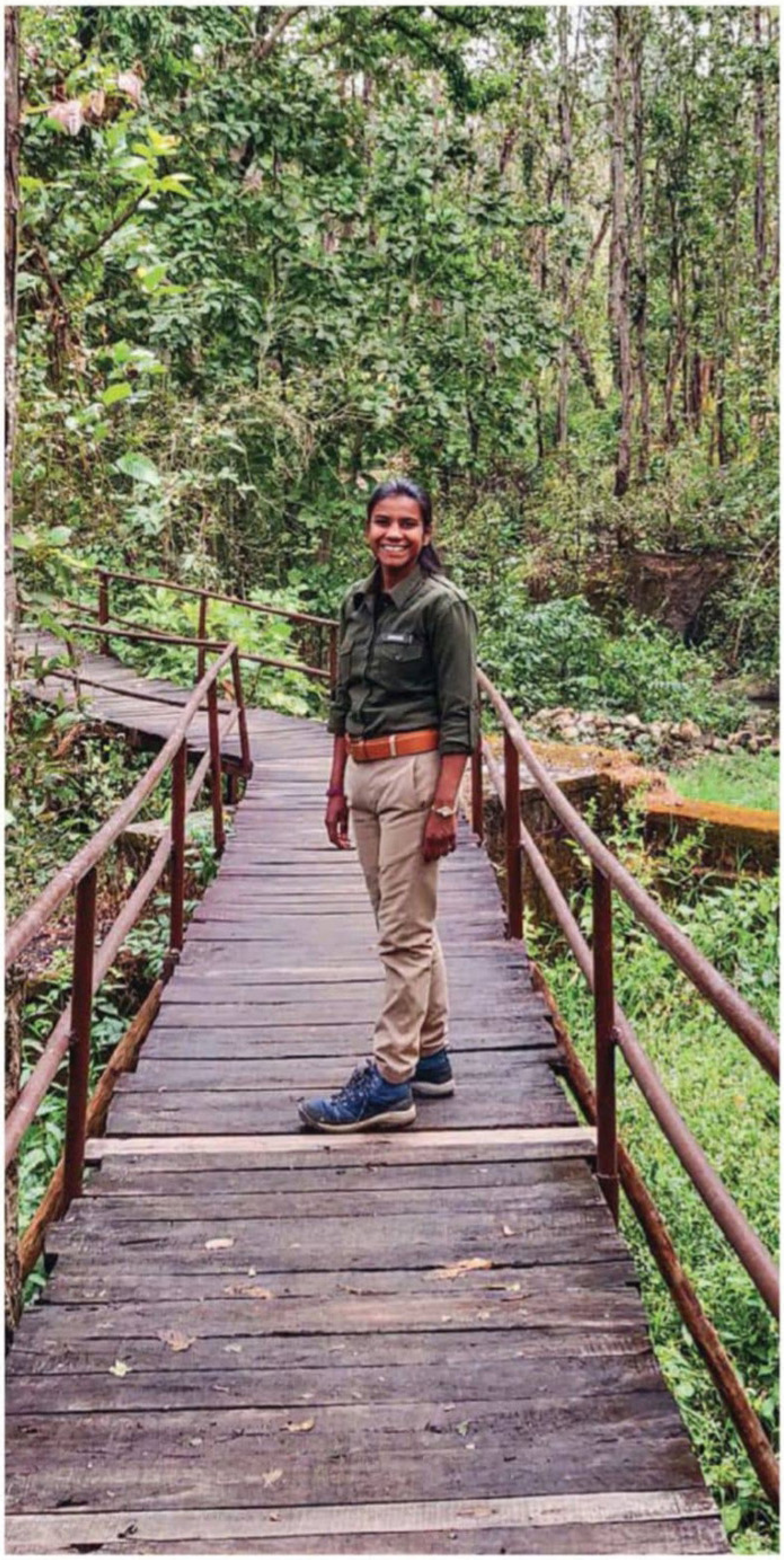
28 ON A KRAKOW CRAWL

32 INSIDE CHENNAI'S NAWABI BASTION

ECO-WARRIOR
IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT AT KANHA

Madhuri Thakur helps trailblaze the path for local, female safari drivers at Kanha National Park

By Sejal Mehta



THRUTHEFRAME/ISTOCK /GETTY IMAGES PLUS/GETTY IMAGES (TIGER), BGS_IMAGE/SHUTTERSTOCK (OWL), SEJAL MEHTA (GUIDE)

Before sunrise, tourist vehicles gather outside the Mukki zone of Madhya Pradesh's Kanha National Park, a lush mix of meadows and dense sal forest.

At the ticketing stand guides and drivers stand in loose groups, warming themselves with glasses of hot tea, while finishing the safari formalities. Two women break away from the male-dominated crowd—a Gond forest guard, Laxmi Maravi, a 'Green Teacher' awardee at the 2019 Sanctuary Awards, and 23-year-old Madhuri Thakur, one of the two women from the nearby Mandla district to have been employed as a safari driver in the park. As the clock strikes six a.m. activity stirs at the gate. Laxmi hurries back in line to accompany one of the safari vehicles as a forest guide, and Madhuri swings into the driver's seat of the Gypsy she operates for Asteya Lodge—just like that, Kanha is open for business.

Driving in a national park requires an advanced set of skills: the ability to tackle the testing terrain, a strong familiarity of wildlife behaviour, and a deep understanding of the park's geography. In Mukki, it was never considered something a woman should, could, or would want to do. However, through an initiative by the Mukki Forest Department, an automobile company began offering driving lessons to select candidates.When S.K. Khare, Assistant Director of the Mukki Zone, asked Madhuri if she'd like to attempt it, she embraced the chance to learn something new.

MADHURI'S MOTHER, WHO'D NEVER SEEN A WOMAN RIDE A SCOOTER, BELIEVED IN HER DAUGHTER'S ABILITIES INSTINCTIVELY

By that time, Khare had already helped faciliate a powerful women's workforce at Mukki. There were six female guides, one forest guard, and 10 tribal women operating the forest canteen, all from villages within the forest buffer. After the female candidates finished their lessons, Khare reached out to everyone from Gypsy owners to field directors and forest officers, to see if there were any available employment opportunities. "Madhuri is a local woman, and we should give her a chance," Khare reasoned. That chance came in the form of a safari driver position.

Despite resistance from Madhuri's extended family, her parents, emboldened by Khare's guidance, stood in support of her decision. Her mother, Neelam Singh Thakur, who'd never even seen a woman ride a scooter, believed in her daughter's abilities instinctively, and was the deciding vote to send Madhuri to driving school. Her father, Gulzar Singh Thakur, was once a forest guard himself, and while he had his reservations, his familiarity with the work she was training

ASTEYA KANHA
235

Madhuri Thakur (bottom and facing page right) is one of the two female safari drivers at Kanha National Park; With lush meadows and sal trees that cradle the tiger, spotted owl and spotted deer (top and facing page left), Kanha is a nature lover's delight.

MARY ANN MCDONALD/ THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES (SPOTTED DEER), SHASHANK BIRLA (JEEP); MARY ANN MCDONALD/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES (SPOTTED DEER), SHASHANK BIRLA (JEEP)

for contributed to his support.

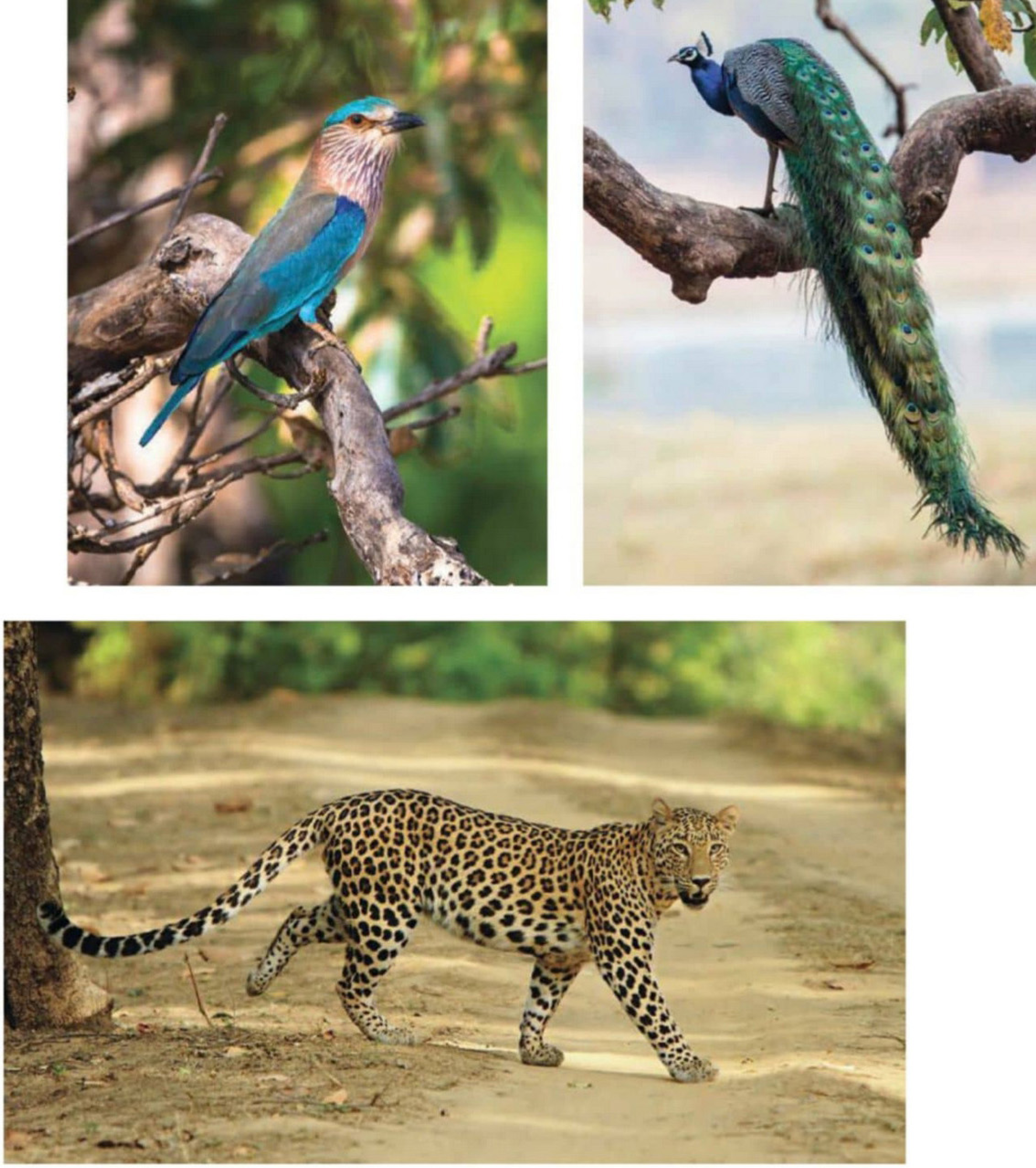
After four weeks of training, Madhuri was given the opportunity to be a safari test driver for four months. She was understandably nervous, fearful of oncoming traffic on the roads, and of coming in close proximity to a tiger in the forest. "The first time we sighted a tiger when I was in the driver's seat, I could not gauge the distance I should keep from it, nor could I anticipate his movements." If you've been on a safari anywhere in India, you'll know exactly what she means. Once a tiger is sighted, something akin to hysteria ripples through the crowd. Everyone wants a front-row view, people stand up, holler, cars reverse and move into impossibly narrow space— it's almost a circus. It's an unfortunate circumstance in a business where seeing the 'elusive stripes' is the only parameter of a successful safari for many people.

Now imagine the immense pressure such a sighting has on the person driving the vehicle.

Fast forward to three years' experience on the job, and Madhuri is confident at navigating the forest, her colleagues, and the visitors. At the start, support from coworkers could be a scarce commodity, some drivers "advised" her against the job for her "own good," telling her she wouldn't be able to manage it. Often guides would get impatient with her in front of guests. "I was just learning, and it was not easy to hear those things. Now I am more confident. Everyone is encouraging now, they make space for me at a sighting and even show me how to handle turning the vehicle in a hurry." She finds it heartening that guests are largely supportive, but adds, "Because of my small frame, I still get a lot of, *'Tum chala logi gaadi? Aapko kisne license de diya?'* Initially, I would get upset, even angry, but now I smile and ask them to see for themselves."

With succour from women who helped pave the way for her (including her employer, Ratna Singh, who started out just like her) and her community and parents, Madhuri stands tall at her place of work. Her father, who would accompany her to the Mukki sector's gate on her initial drives and wait outside until she was done, had the opportunity to watch her work for himself. He was assigned as guide on one of her drives and remembers being filled with pride as she expertly drove through the forest, speaking to her guests with aplomb, nodding to her colleagues as they drove past. "We saw two tigers that day," he smiles, "we make a good team." He adds, "It's not just the fact that she's a pioneer; she manages her expenses herself, and shares my burden of home expenditure. I could not be more proud of this."

Madhuri is determined to further her passion for wildlife; she is training to be a naturalist. "I know this forest, but I want to understand it now, and that means studying the movement of animals, birds, plants, and seasons. This is what I love— introducing my forest to outsiders and passing on the wonder of seeing the wilderness." ▮



No two safari rides in Kanha are the same—some take visitors to a leopard (bottom), while others to the common Indian roller (top left) and the peacock (top right).

KARL WELLER/SHUTTERSTOCK (INDIAN ROLLER), HENK BOGAARD/SHUTTERSTOCK (PEACOCK), THE ETERNITY PHOTOGRAPHY -/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (LEOPARD)

CITY ON TREND

KRAKOW

Poland's second city is a first-rate destination for travellers seeking elegant medieval architecture, a buzzing bar scene and a rich history spanning some of Europe's most seismic moments **By Nicola Trup**

View over Krakow's medieval Old Town.

GETTY

When it comes to looks, Poland's second city takes first place. Its people suffered hugely during the Second World War, but Krakow's buildings were spared the devastation inflicted on many other Polish cities, leaving its medieval Old Town—a UNESCO World Heritage Site with a castle, cathedral and one of Europe's largest medieval squares—mostly intact. Stray beyond the historic centre of the pretty postcard city, across the Vistula River and to the outer edges, and you'll find districts with fascinating stories to tell: tales of Jewish history, living under communism, or how new life is being breathed into this old city. (*poland.travel)*

KAZIMIERZ

"The danger for Kazimierz is making it into a Jewish Disneyland," Celina, my guide,

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STANISŁAW NOWAK
SKLEP SPOŻYWCZY
BENJAMIN
HOLCER
STOLARZ
KONCERT LIVE MUSIC
KONCERT LIVE MUSIC
KONCER LIVE MUS

The heart of Krakow's Jweish Quarter is Szeroka Street (bottom); Mehoffer Garden (top) remains one of the city's most iconic.

BARTOSZ CYGAN, ALAMY

says, as we stand next to a stall selling skull caps, Star of David necklaces and carved statuettes of klezmer musicians.

This Judaica (Jewish ceremonial art) isn't aimed at Krakow's tiny Jewish community, who number just 120. It's for visitors who come to trace the history of the district, once home to around 56,000 Jews before the Second World War, during which the Nazis forced the vast majority into the Krakow Ghetto and concentration camps.

After the Holocaust, this part of the city was "a ghost town," says Celina—abandoned apart from a community of artists drawn here by cheap rents. But, "it all started changing rapidly after *Schindler's List* [the 1993 movie that was filmed here]." An influx of visitors and investment followed, the area's bohemian vibe also getting a boost. A pair of former tram depots have been transformed into an engineering museum and a restaurant, Stara Zajezdnia (*starazajezdniakrakow.pl)*; a 1970s former office block has become hip Nova Resto Bar (*novarestobar.pl)*; and vacant lots have been commandeered by clusters of food trucks.

Nudging up against the Old Town, this is one of Krakow's most central neighbourhoods, but it manages to squeeze in pockets of greenery. On a sunny afternoon, people flock to the lush Mleczarnia beer garden (*mle.pl)*, or peaceful Mehoffer Garden, named after the local artist who designed it (*mnk.pl*) hidden behind a museum, between apartment blocks.

We wander over to Plac Nowy, a square Celina describes as "a big party area." At its centre is a red-brick rotunda, formerly a kosher slaughterhouse, whose windows serve as hole-in-the-wall food stands. Most of them sell *zapiekanki*, Poland's answer to the croque monsieur—a toasted, open-faced sandwich topped with mushrooms and melted cheese. Tomorrow, when I return, there will be a flea market, selling everything from cutlery and clothing to more Stars of David.

Kazimierz has several museums dedicated to its Jewish history, but the Galicia Jewish Museum (*galiciajewishmuseum.or*) best fuses the past and present. A sleek space with a cool café and a bilingual bookshop, it has a permanent exhibition of modern photos documenting what remains of Jewish culture in the region.

We pause at Ulica Szeroka, a square with trees at its centre and pavement cafés skirting its edges. Celina points out two restaurants, Ariel (*ariel-krakow.pl)* and Ester (*restauracjaester.pl)*, which play the best klezmer music in town. We pop into Remuh Synagogue, which survived Nazi occupation and is now Krakow's only operational synagogue. Peaceful and understated, it's a world away from the souvenir stands just beyond the gates.

Wawel Castle (left) borders Poland's largest river, the Vistula; Pączki (inset) are Poland's popular filled doughnuts.

AWL IMAGES

PODGÓRZE

This has to be the best view in the city. In front of me, hilltop Wawel Castle (*wawel.krakow.pl*) rises above the Old Town, while to the left is a tree-filled former quarry. On a clear day you can see all the way to the Tatra Mountains, marking the border with Slovakia.

Krakow has four man-made hills, all with hazy origins. The one I'm standing on, Krakus, is named for the city's mythical founder and is believed to have been built by the ancient Slavs at least a millennium ago.

Just across the Vistula from Kazimierz, this area feels suburban, its streets lined with villa-like homes and restaurants. At the junction of Staromostowa and Kazimierza Brodzińskiego, we buy cones of tart blueberry ice cream from old-school grocery shop Delikatesowo. "This is the most international food corner in Krakow—you have Italian, Vietnamese, Basque," says Szymon. "Fifteen years ago, there was nothing. The pedestrian bridge opened in 2009 and everything changed," he adds. Thanks to the Father Bernatka Bridge, more visitors are straying south of the river.

Under Nazi occupation, Podgórze was home to the Jewish Ghetto, and the district honours its history on Plac Bohaterów Getta (Ghetto Heroes Square) with a powerful memorial: 33 oversized, empty metal chairs. Nearby, a pharmacy whose owners passed on food and information to ghetto residents, Apteka Pod Orłem (*muzeumkrakowa.pl*), has been turned into a museum, as has Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory (*mnk.pl*), a short walk away in Zabłocie.

Located on the riverbank, the brutalist Forum Hotel opened in 1988, and after its closure in 2002 its bedrooms were abandoned. Today, the ground floor has been given over to Forum Przestrzenie, a bar, club and gig space that hosts raves in the former kitchen and conference rooms. (*forumprzestrzenie.com*)

Robert, part of the team behind the venue, takes me to the basement bar, Klub 89, which has been kept almost exactly as it was in its '80s heyday. It's a David Lynch-style dream of red lights, carpeted walls and leather booths. If the bedrooms were

When in Krakow...

① PĄCZKI

On Tłusty Czwartek (Fat Thursday), the last Thursday before Lent, it's traditional in Poland to eat *pączki* (doughnuts). Some of the best are to be had just outside the Old Town, at Cukiernia Michałek (*facebook.com/cukierniamichalek*), where the fillings include rose jam.

② OLD TOWN

Krakow's crowning glory is its medieval Old Town. Highlights include Wawel Castle, and the city's central square Rynek Główny, where you'll find the beautiful Cloth Hall, worth visiting for its architecture rather than its pricey souvenirs.

③ TYTANO

A complex of bars, restaurants, nightclubs and arts spaces set in a former tobacco factory just outside the Old Town. Grab a beer at Weźże Krafta and a carnivore's dream sandwich at 'meat bar' Meat & Go, before a gig at live music venue Zet Pe Te. (*tytano.org*)

④ PLANTY

Encircling the Old Town, this park is made of 30 gardens, dotted with flowerbeds and statues of historical Polish figures, like Nicolaus Copernicus.

⑤ OBWARZANKI

Created here in the 15th century as a gift for the king, the *obwarzanek* is a sort of proto bagel, still sold from street-corner carts around the city. Crusty and slightly sweet, it's lighter than its Jewish cousin, and while it's not filled, it usually comes topped with poppy seeds, or sometimes salt or cheese.

ALAMY

available and looked like this, I'd check in.

"Everything inside needs rebuilding," Robert tells me.

NOWA HUTA

As I'm wondering how I'm going to recognise Klaudia, an ancient green car sputters to a halt in front of me, its engine yowling. It's a 1972 Trabant, a GDR brand that was popular across the Eastern Bloc. And my guide is driving it for a reason: we're off to the 'workers' paradise' of Nowa Huta.

Built between 1949 and 1951, Krakow's easternmost district, Nowa Huta, housed employees of the steelworks at its heart. It's one of only two planned cities in the world built in the socialist realist style, the signature Soviet aesthetic that was all about big, blustering buildings and banging the drum for communism. "The city was a gift from Stalin," Klaudia says. "Showing off, really." Paranoia meant 250 bomb shelters were built under Nowa Huta, some of which are now open for tours.

Rattling through the 'new' part of town (built between the 1970s and 1990s), passing the Polish Aviation Museum, a former airfield, and Nowohuckie Centrum Kultury, a cultural centre, outside which are street food trucks and a live band.

The city was intended to be laid out in the shape of a wheel, with Plac Centralny at its heart, but only half the spokes ever materialised. One of those spokes, Aleja Róż, is a wide, partly pedestrianised street punctuated by tidy lawns and flanked by domineering, Orwellian apartment blocks, built for the staff of the steelworks. "Everybody was equal, but some more equal than others," my guide quips, pointing to the flats with balconies.

The buildings' ground floors are given over to grand colonnades, and shops and restaurants that hark back to Nowa Huta's heyday, from the Bar Mleczny Centralny (a milk bar barely changed since the early 1950s) to Cepelix (*facebook.com/cepelix),* a gift shop with vintage chandeliers and wooden display cabinets. Amid the net curtains and laminate furniture of Restauracja Stylowa (*stylowa-krakow.pl*)—once popular with Communist Party officials—Klaudia buys me a cherry vodka, urging me to "drink it Polish-style, in one shot." It's not all communist throwbacks, though. On either side of the road are branches of hip local ice cream chain Good Lood, both with queues of teenagers outside. (*goodlood.com)*

Central Square, Nowa Huta, is a classic example of socialist city planning.

Aleja Róż was also once home to the world's largest Lenin statue, and while that went the way of the communist regime, the steelworks once named after him still stands. Today, it employs 3,500, a fraction of its peak workforce of 40,000. At the entrance are two fortress-like administration buildings, one for the workers and one for management. While both brim with original features, the managers' building, with its marble staircases and chandeliers, is more impressive. Some truly were more equal than others. ▮

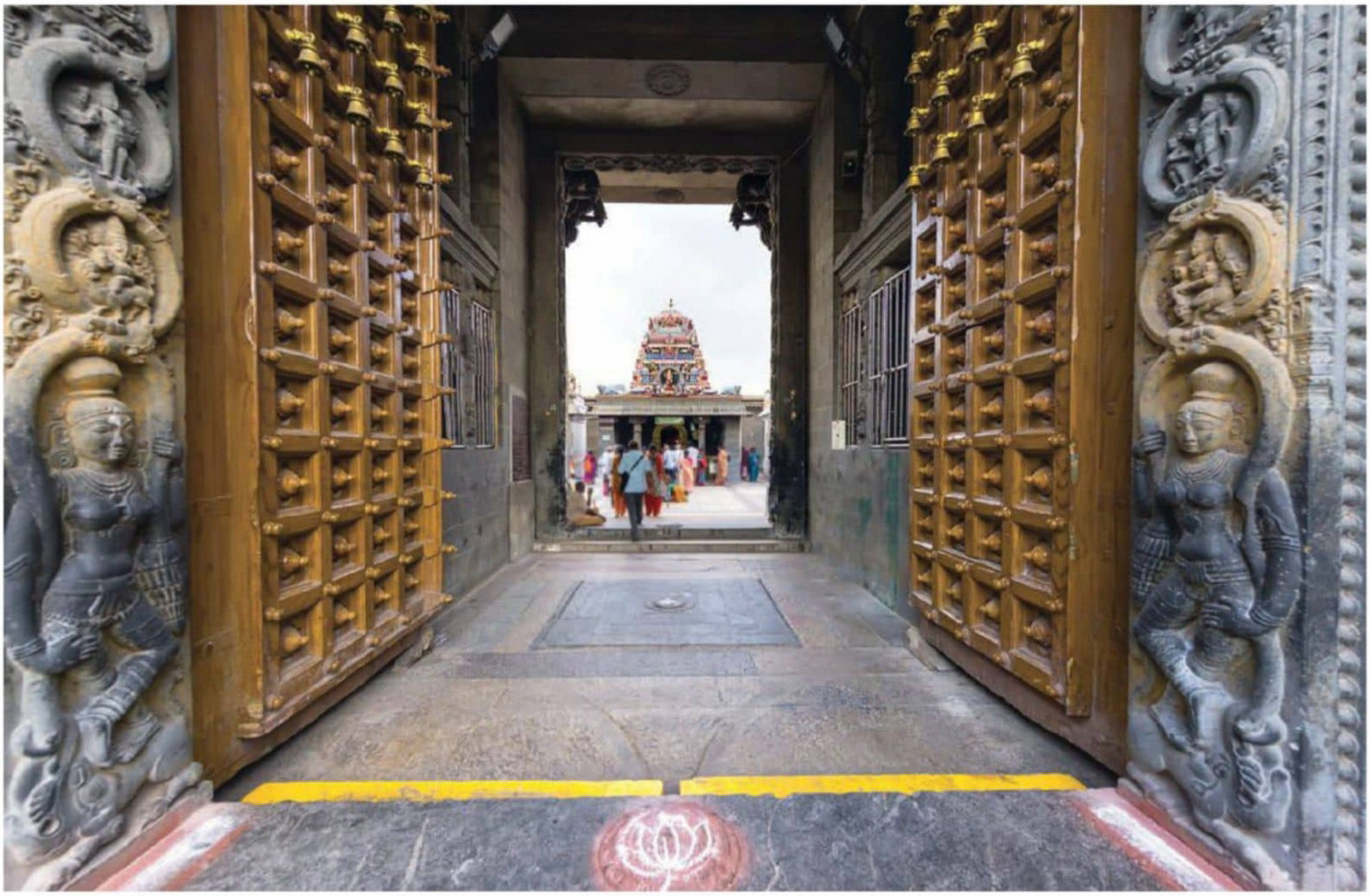
Essentials

Flights from Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru to Krakow usually include at least one or more layovers at Middle-Eastern and European gateway cities. Puro Krakow Kazimierz has double rooms from 222 Polish zlotys (£47/₹4,367), room only. *purohotel.pl*

TRAIL TALE

INSIDE CHENNAI'S NAWABI BASTION

Triplicane, the city's heritage quarter, teems with a multiculturalism that was bequeathed by its sophisticated erstwhile Mughal influences **By Kalpana Sunder**



JAYAKUMAR JAYAKUMAR/SHUTTERSTOCCK

The famous Kapaleeshwarar Temple in Mylapore was influenced by Chennai's erstwhile Muslim royalty. The land for the water tank in front of it was donated to the temple by the Nawabs of Arcot.

I love being a tourist in Chennai, where I was born, and have spent most of my life. Triplicane (the anglicised version) or Thiruvallikeni (which in Tamil means the sacred lily ponds), is one of the oldest localities in Chennai—a multicultural neighbourhood, with the sacred 8th-century Parthasarathy temple, as well as the Big Mosque, sharing space companionably. Today it's a crowded quarter, famous for its many bookshops and mansions that offer cheap rooms for bachelors.

I am on a heritage walk led by local historian and documentary filmmaker Kombai S. Anwar, who starts by explaining the history of the area. "It all started with the siege of the Gingee Fort by Aurangzeb for six long years, in the war with the Marathas, when the Mughal Emperor appointed Zulfikar Ali, the first Nawab of the Carnatic in 1692," he says. The Nawab established a camp in Arcot between the Krishna and Kaveri rivers. He was succeeded by six Nawabs, and this led to a power centre being formed in South India.

The most famous Nawab was Muhammad Ali Wallajah, a secular ruler who donated land to churches and temples and commissioned the Madrasa-E-Azam Islamic school in Anna Salai.

Anwar welcomes our group with a bottle of attar. He tells us how Chennai has Muslims who are ethnically very diverse and speak different languages other than Urdu, and that he is a Tamil-speaking Muslim. As we walk beside the crumbling walls of red-bricked buildings, he tells us about how Nawab Muhammad Ali Wallajah built the famous Chepauk Palace, over a sprawling 117 acres, where the River Cooum joined the Bay of Bengal, in 1764. When he built the palace, the neighbouring area of Triplicane developed into the residences of the nobles, and others working for the Nawab: as many as 20,000 North Indian Muslims, who spoke Urdu, moved here.

The palace was built out of lime mortar and red brick and designed by East India Company engineer Paul Benfield with two blocks, the southern block housing the private quarters called *Kalas Mahal* and the northern block with the Durbar Hall called *Humayun Mahal*. We walk past crumbling walls with plants sprouting out of bricks, intricate *jharokha* windows, wide arches, latticed balconies and cupolas.

From here we amble towards Wallajah Mosque on Triplicane High Road, also called the Big Mosque, built in the Mughal style. This is Chennai's oldest mosque dating back to 1795, built completely out of granite. Inside the large hall, is a chronogram written in Persian, which helps in dating the year of construction of the mosque.

From the mosque we see a stately building with blue window shutters and stained glass—this was once the Consulate of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, started by a family in the indigo trade. Today, the heritage building is the Broadlands hotel with old-fashioned rooms and age-old punkahs.

After the death of the last Nawab, the British took over the ruling family's properties as they were heavily in debt, and finally consented to give them the title of 'Prince of Arcot.' We walk through a tree-lined avenue with sleek Victorian cannons, to arrive at the stately Amir Mahal, the hereditary home of the Nawabs in Zam Bazaar area.

The Nawabs moved here in 1876, and it's been their home ever since. We walk through this time capsule, lined with sofas and glittering chandeliers, porcelain vases, memorabilia from large wooden howdahs and vintage palanquins, past a winding wooden staircase to the upstairs Durbar Hall, where huge oil paintings of the Nawabs grace the walls.

We end our walk in Mylapore, today a predominantly Tamil Brahmin area with the famous Kapaleeshwarar Temple, and the water tank in front of it. However, not many know that the temple was influenced by Chennai's former Muslim royalty. The land for the tank was donated to the temple by the Nawabs of Arcot. In return for that generosity, every year, on the 10th day of Muharram, Muslim faithfuls are allowed to dip their sacred symbol of the hand in the waters of the tank.

Since 1876, Amir Mahal (top) has been the hereditary home of the Nawabs; The old quarter of Triplicane (bottom) is crowded with bookstores and old mansions.

KALPANA SUNDER (RED PALACE), DINODIA PHOTO DINODIA PHOTO/THE IMAGE BANK UNRELEASED/GETTY IMAGES (CURZONS)

THE FOCUS

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GECKOPHOTOS/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES PLUS/GETTY IMAGES

36 A POETIC PORTRAIT OF BAKU

Vaqif
Mirzə Fətəli

Children celebrate the nation's literary figures through folk dance in front of the Nizami Museum of Azerbaijani Literature.

DENIS SV/SHUTTERSTOCK

Mirzə Cəlil

Azerbaijan's Nasimi
Festival brings out the
beauty of the Eurasian
capital as scholars and
poetry lovers across the
globe descend upon
this artistic epicentre

BY **SHAIKH AYAZ**

A Poetic Portrait of Baku

Last September, I joined a group of academics from the Arab world and Europe on their way to celebrate the life and work of a 14th-century Azerbaijani poet. Held in Baku, the Nasimi Festival was a lavishly mounted series of cultural programmes devoted to Imadaddin Nasimi's 650th birth anniversary. President Ilham Aliyev had earlier declared 2019 as the 'Year of Nasimi.' Known for his revolutionary poetry in the Turkic, Arabic and Persian languages and staunch advocacy of Hurufi philosophy that emphasised on the spiritual powers of letters and numbers, Nasimi was a bit of a misfit in his time. As he himself once remarked in a famous verse, "Both worlds can fit within me, but in this world I cannot fit / I am the placeless essence, but into existence I cannot fit."

In 1417, Nasimi was accused of heresy. He was duly produced before a shariah court and ultimately executed in Aleppo by religious fundamentalists, sending shock waves across the region. Today, six centuries later, in what can be described as 'poetic justice', Nasimi has become one of modern Azerbaijan's spiritual and moral guardians. "He laid the foundation of our literary and philosophical imagination," said our host Emin Mammadov, as we whizzed past Baku's cloud-bursting skyline with gleaming glass towers and skyscrapers interrupted at regular intervals by Soviet remnants, most starkly evident in the Brutalist architecture and ageing, Russian-made Ladas vying for space with Lamborghinis on the highway. If Nasimi were alive today he would have found it hard to recognise the new Baku, fuelled in recent years by oil riches that has made it a byword for both modernity and luxury. But here's the one thing the Sufi mystic would be proud of—Azerbaijan's exemplary secularism, a cause for which he had laid down his life.

"Nasimi is controversial and it's brave of Azerbaijan to have embraced him," observed Neil van der Linden, a scholar on Mid-East arts and culture and one of the key speakers at the Nasimi Festival. "Because Nasimi was born here in Shamakhi and because he was a dissident," van der Linden went on, "through him Azerbaijan, in principle a Shi'a majority country, tries to distance itself from the traditional rift between Shi'a and Sunni Islam." Throughout the festival, he lugged around a Nasimi tote bag gifted to all delegates upon arrival along with a Nasimi T-shirt and hoodie. An abiding interest in music and poetry keeps drawing van der Linden back to Baku. He claimed this to be his fourth trip.

Like van der Linden, tourists generally pour into Azerbaijan for its music and poetry—but also for its famed commitment to cosmopolitanism and diversity. The country's nearly 99-lakh population observe the Islamic festival of Ramadan, but reserve their biggest celebrations for Nowruz, the Parsi new year. Sitting on the outpost of Eurasia, Azerbaijan's liberal ambitions and Western values undoubtedly make it closer in spirit to Europe than to the Arab world and Asia. As a nation, it has successfully fostered a culture where its Islamic identity stays firmly in the backdrop. Driving around Baku, it was only after van der Linden pointed out Azerbaijan's Euro-centrism that it struck me that there was hardly a mosque in sight. There was one, with a golden dome, near the airport. But you don't hear the five-time calls to prayer, or azaan, which is typical of the Muslim world. Van der Linden termed it a Soviet heritage, explaining, "In Uzbekistan, for example, Chechnya Islam had a strong comeback. On the contrary, the Azerbaijani regime does not encourage religion. While Azerbaijan is overwhelmingly Shi'a, I think that most Azerbaijanis don't see a strong Shi'a Islamic state comparable to Iran as their ideal. I have never heard of a crackdown on neither religion nor religious dissidents." Imagine our shared surprise then, when the next day, while exploring the city during a break from the Nasimi celebrations, we discovered the Juma Mosque, a striking 12th-century Maragha-Nakhchivan masterpiece with its colourful tassels, ornaments, inscriptions and ghost elements.

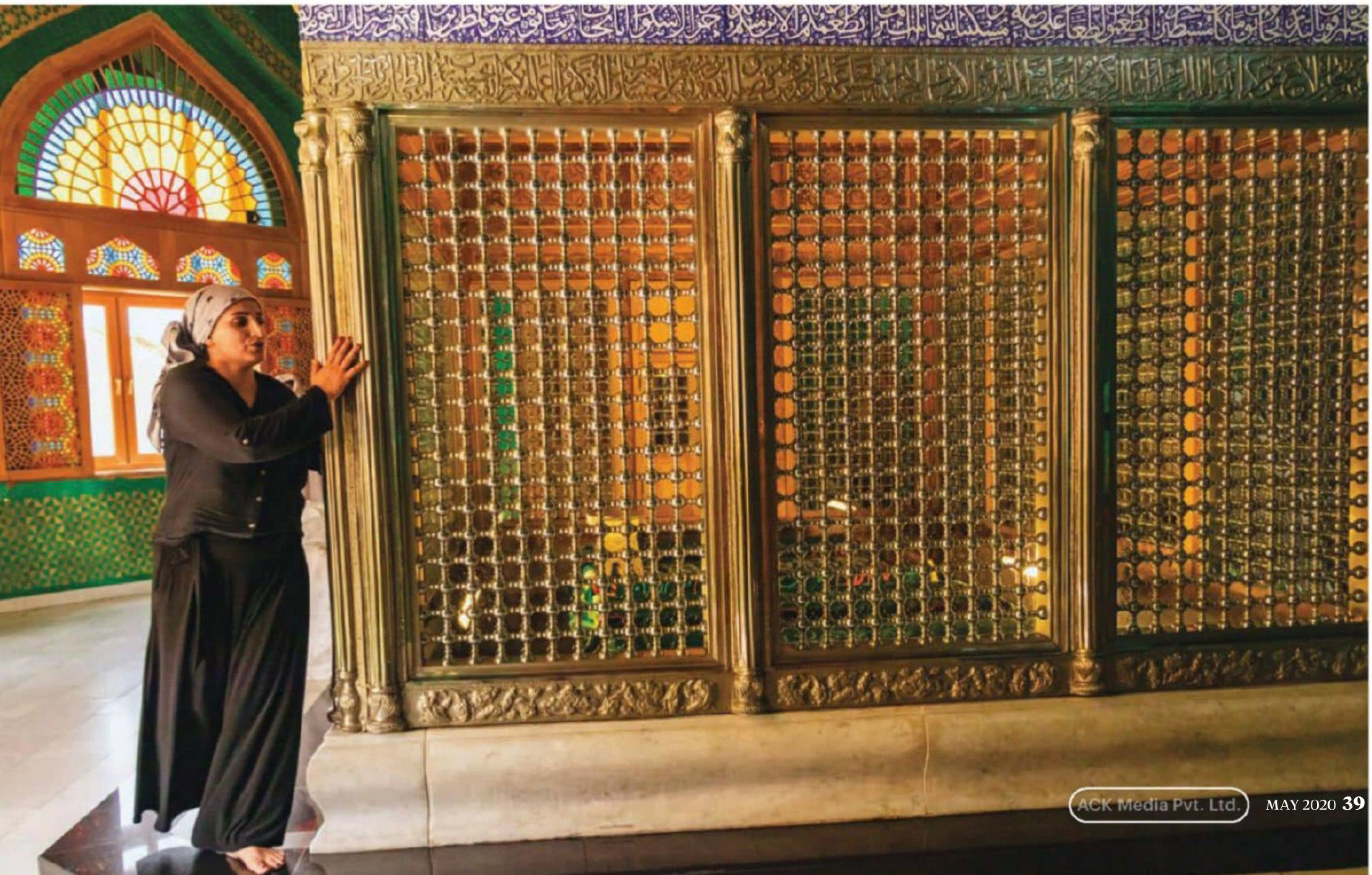
The mosque stands in the heart of Baku, in what the locals call the 'Icherisheher'—literally, the inner city. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, this medieval haven is Baku's showpiece, a timely and welcoming reminder of the city's rich spiritual past. Also called the Old City, this place is as perfect as any to reflect on Baku's past, present and future; from this ancient walled enclave visitors can see the contours of modern Azerbaijan and its soaring ambition. Built in the 11-12th century when Azerbaijan was a part of the Persian empire, the Maiden Tower was once used as a lookout point. Today, you can climb its spiral staircase and see from its rooftop a city caught in a tremendous flux. Even as you get a feel of Icherisheher's old-world charm, the glittering Flame Towers (a trio of skyscrapers) stand proudly in the background. Azerbaijan has a strong Zoroastrian heritage and the Flame Towers, symbolising fire in design, represent a link to its pre-Islamic past. It's also a shining symbol of Baku's 21st-century urbanism as well as its multiculturalism. But it is, by no means, the only modern attraction that Baku has to offer.

Perched on a slight elevation in a city that's otherwise scandalously below the sea level, the Heydar Aliyev Center, with its wave-like ascension, has quickly become Baku's hottest cultural property in less than a decade of its launch. In 2018, it was accorded the ultimate tribute that any country can bestow on its national monument—a new 200-manat banknote was released by Azerbaijan's Central Bank to honour the building's extraordinary design. Based on a prizewinning Zaha Hadid blueprint, the Heydar Aliyev Center's statement-making architecture is a sharp departure from Soviet Modernism. Many Azerbaijanis say the building reflects the "optimism of a nation that is looking to the future." Mainly, Baku's architecture is a "mix of many cultures including Persian, Ottoman European and Imperial Russian," said Mammadov.

For artists like Ayna Moazen, the Icherisheher is a creative

RANDREI/SHUTTERSTOCK (BUILDINGS), SEBAHATDOGEN/SHUTTERSTOCK (MOSQUES)

Baku's heritage of fire worship was the inspiration for this larger-than-life trio of skyscrapers (top); The Azerbaijani capital's mosques (bottom) are architecturally stunning.



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Drinking wine (top left) and playing chess (top right) are two of Baku's most popular pastimes; The Maiden Tower (bottom) is a 12th-century watchtower.

FARHAD IBRAHIMZADE/SHUTTERSTOCK (RESTAURANT), LESHIY985/SHUTTERSTOCK (MAN).
ALEKSANDAR TODOROVIC/SHUTTERSTOCK (WATCHTOWER)

> IF ZAHA HADID'S HEYDAR ALIYEV CENTER IS FUTURISTIC, THE PALACE OF THE SHIRVANSHAHS IS AN OLD DAME WITH HER BYGONE CHARMS

lifeline. On weekends, she can be found here enjoying a leisurely stroll and taking pictures for her Instagram. "Generally soaking in the ambience," she smiled, when I caught up with her at the Nasimi Festival's art event. "With all of its progress and constant change, Baku, for the most part, has retained a little of that Soviet hangover in a post-Soviet era," said Moazen, who's originally from Ardabil, Iran.

Arguably, the Icherisheher's most striking monument is the 15th-century Palace of the Shirvanshahs. If Zaha Hadid's Heydar Aliyev Center is futuristic, the Palace of the Shirvanshahs is its exact opposite—the old dame with her hypnotic bygone charms. "We used to run along the streets of the Old City as children and play tag or hide-and-seek, hiding here in a secluded spot of one of the street deadlocks," recalled Dr. Shirin Melikova, director of the Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum. "In the sudden silence, it was possible to dream of a beautiful and distant future, looking straight into the clear blue-blue sky with slowly floating clouds as if cut out of paper," she waxed eloquent in an email later. "I remember how in the square in front of the Palace of the Shirvanshahs, our teacher usually seated us in the wide and cool shade of the trees and gave us papers and pencils to draw... We, blushing and excited from running around, could not calm down and tune in to creative work, grabbed each other's pencils, tore paper, laughed and copied cars and little men—but in the end, everyone managed to draw a bright yellow-yellow sun."

The sun and fire are hopeful metaphors in a country watched over by Russia, Turkey and Iran. Despite being surrounded by these political and cultural giants, the Land of Fire has retained its distinctive culture. "Azerbaijan has a rich history in terms of its connection to the East and West, mainly because of its geographical position," Zeigam Azizov, a noted British essayist and artist, told me. Azizov was one of the speakers whose talk on Nasimi, Hurufism and the "imperfections of existence", was a big hit, especially with the young and hip crowd at the Baku Book Center, a capacious library aptly situated on a street named after the Russian literary god, Nikolai Gogol. "The strongest role played in the formation of Azerbaijani culture is a deeply colonial history, which led to a cultural mix from Zoroastrians of Persia on their way to India, then Caliphate, later the Ottomans and finally the Russian Empire before the Soviet," said Azizov, who was born in Soviet Azerbaijan.

Van der Linden added, "In brief, I can say that Azerbaijan is still trying to find its place. It was carved off from Iran by the Czars...for a while it was part of a unity with Georgia, and the Ottomans vied for it too. Northwest Iran has a large Azeri-speaking community and ethnically, there is a homogeneity. Over seventy years of USSR have also left their mark. And the conflict with Armenia. Now it tries to be on its own. Nobody wants to join Iran, although both are Shi'a and have a common history." He added, smiling, "One thing is that most people love wine way too much to join Iran."

Another eminent source on Baku's culture I met during the festival was Dr. Michael Reinhard Hess, a Berlin-based scholar who had written books on poet Nasimi. Over the course of my trip we spent many hours talking. Scratch that. It was more like him talking and yours truly at the receiving end of his intellectual assault. "Baku, for me, is not only a place that is outwardly enjoyable with its boulevard, the cuisine, music, architecture, history and the friendly people—but one of the hubs of the Turkic-speaking world," Hess told me during one of our dinnertime conversations. "All kinds of cultures meet and exist here side by side and also produce fruitful syntheses and experiments in a density and with a vividness I know from few other places. There is no other place where I have seen Iranians, Israelis, Arabs, Turks, Azerbaijanis, Russians, Chinese and Europeans get along with each other and exchange in such a non-conceited way as they do in Baku. Every time I am here, I like it a little more."

For culture aficionados, there's plenty to absorb here. For instance, the Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum near the waterfront is an ideal place to explore Baku's treasure troves. With its architecture resembling a rolling carpet, the museum is a one-of-its-kind, boasting the largest collection of Azeri rugs anywhere in the world. Established in 1967, the ANCM has preserved several 20th-century portrait carpets of Imadaddin Nasimi.

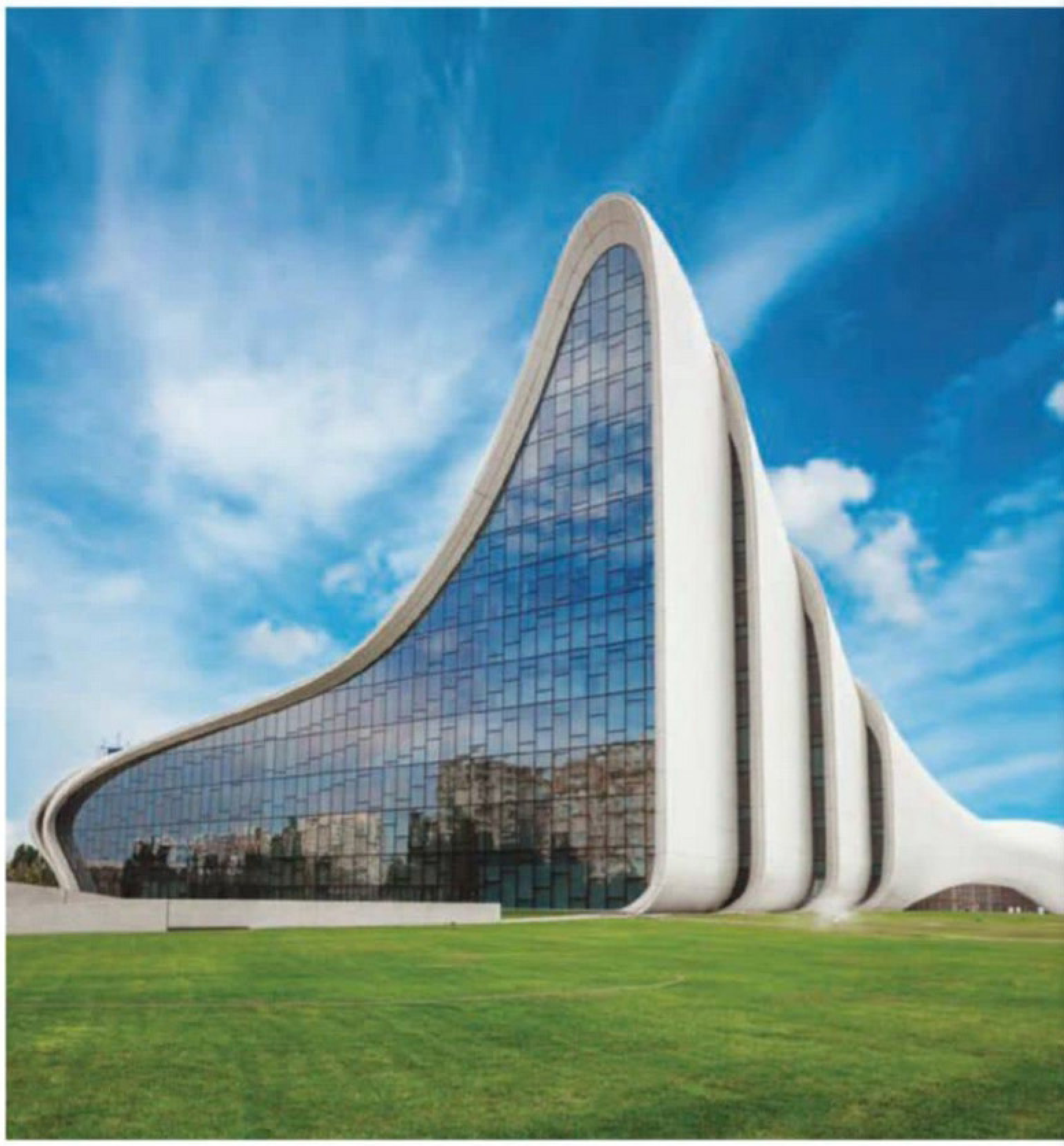
One of the exhibitions dedicated to Nasimi's 650th anniversary featured a carpet by artist Eldar Mikailzada. At first glance, it resembled a straightforward portrait. But it turned out to be full of hidden symbolism. It depicted Nasimi in radiant colours with classical Azerbaijani *khatai* ornament designs at its bottom. Behind the poet's shoulders one could see landscapes of two cities, his hometown Shamakhi on the right and Aleppo on the left, the final destination of his life. Swirling clouds with outlines of Arabic letters hovered above his head. "Arabic letters have numerical values," said Dr. Shirin Melikova, director of the ANCM as she accompanied us on a walk-through. "The composition includes numbers that have a special meaning both in the work of Nasimi and in Hurufism, the Sufi movement that he followed. They denote the numbers "1", "4", "5" and "6". The unit (or 1) is the sign of the almighty, 4 symbolises seasons, 5 is the five pillars of Islam, and 6 is the unity of the sides and directions surrounding a person (up, down, left, right, forward, back)." As Nasimi once advised in his own writing, "Look to the world from all six sides."

Since Azerbaijan has a rich tradition of poetry, scholars insist on looking beyond Nasimi. More than Nasimi, it is Nizami Ganjavi who is considered the national poet of Azerbaijan today. "Nizami was born here although from a Persian-speaking family and he wrote in Persian," van der Linden said. "So Persian and Azeri-speaking people compete for him." Persia's other great bard, Hafez, is virtually absent in Azerbaijan. “But he is the most prominent poet in Iran,” van der Linden was quick to remind. “Eighty five percent of the sung classical Iranian music is about Hafez. Rumi is less present in Iran. He was born in Balkh, now in Afghanistan, and died in Turkey, so nations in this region claim him, without fully wanting to claim his thoughts.”

When it comes to Persian poetry, most avid readers immediately think of Rumi and Hafez. Hafez is often claimed by Iran, as he was born in Shiraz while Rumi’s popularity transcends borders though he’s originally from Afghanistan. Hess laughed when I told him that without Rumi there would be no Bollywood. “Love is what many people want to read,” he piped up, adding, “In many of Rumi’s poems, love seems to be a solution to all of life’s problems.” Serious critics, on the other hand, favour the great Fuzûlî’s Dîvân style. Compared to Nasimi, Fuzûlî opted for lucid lyricism. “To be honest,” Hess concurred, “Füzuli’s poetry is regarded by many as the apogee of Azerbaijani poetry.” Extolling Fuzûlî, Hess argued that his “works have become much more famous than those of Nasimi’s.” The explanation lay in the nature of their work: “While complicated mystical teachings underlay Nasimi’s verses Füzuli frequently treated rather mundane topics.”

Because of its stirring alchemy of poetry and spirituality, as well as its own regional musical legacy, Baku is home to a refined musical scene. Like in Iran or India, for centuries, music has been a way of life for Azeris. While Azerbaijani jazz musicians and pianists are much sought-after globally, the ‘classical folkloric’ Azeri music known as *mugam* is highly revered for its heritage and history. “It is related to the mugam of Turkey and the *shashmaqam* of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as the *maqam* of Iraq and the dastgah of Iran,” said van der Linden. We were at the Heydar Aliyev Center, savouring an evening of musical extravaganza that marked the Nasimi Festival’s finale. A lover of musique savante, van der Linden said, “Azeri music is very emotional and the text must consist of high poetry, as anybody not mastering Azeri could hear just as well.” Partly due to the Soviet influence, Baku also hosts ensembles and orchestras. After suggesting that I should try the Azerbaijani fusion of ‘Western’ classical music with local elements, Dr. Michael Reinhard Hess explained admirably, “The interest in music was kept alive in Azerbaijan through all the vicissitudes of history, including the creation and downfall of Safavid Iran and the Russian conquest.”

After four intense days of activity and heavy doses of cultural exchange, the Nasimi Festival ended on a fitting note, with a symphonic performance on a windy October evening. It was close to midnight when we reached our hotel after the show wrapped up. After bidding *khoda-hafezes* (Persian for ‘May god be your guardian’) and heleliks (Azerbaijani for ‘see you until next’), the scholars and professors who had early morning flights gradually retired to their suites. “Oh, don’t worry,” my friend Mammadov tried to cheer me up. “You will be back soon,” he said, reassuringly, before sending me off with a warm hug and a healthy reserve of poetry that I can gleefully quote the rest of the year. ▮



The Heydar Aliyev Center (top) is an important cultural building designed by the eminent architect Zaha Hadid; People travel from around the world to purchase carpets (bottom) crafted in Azerbaijan.

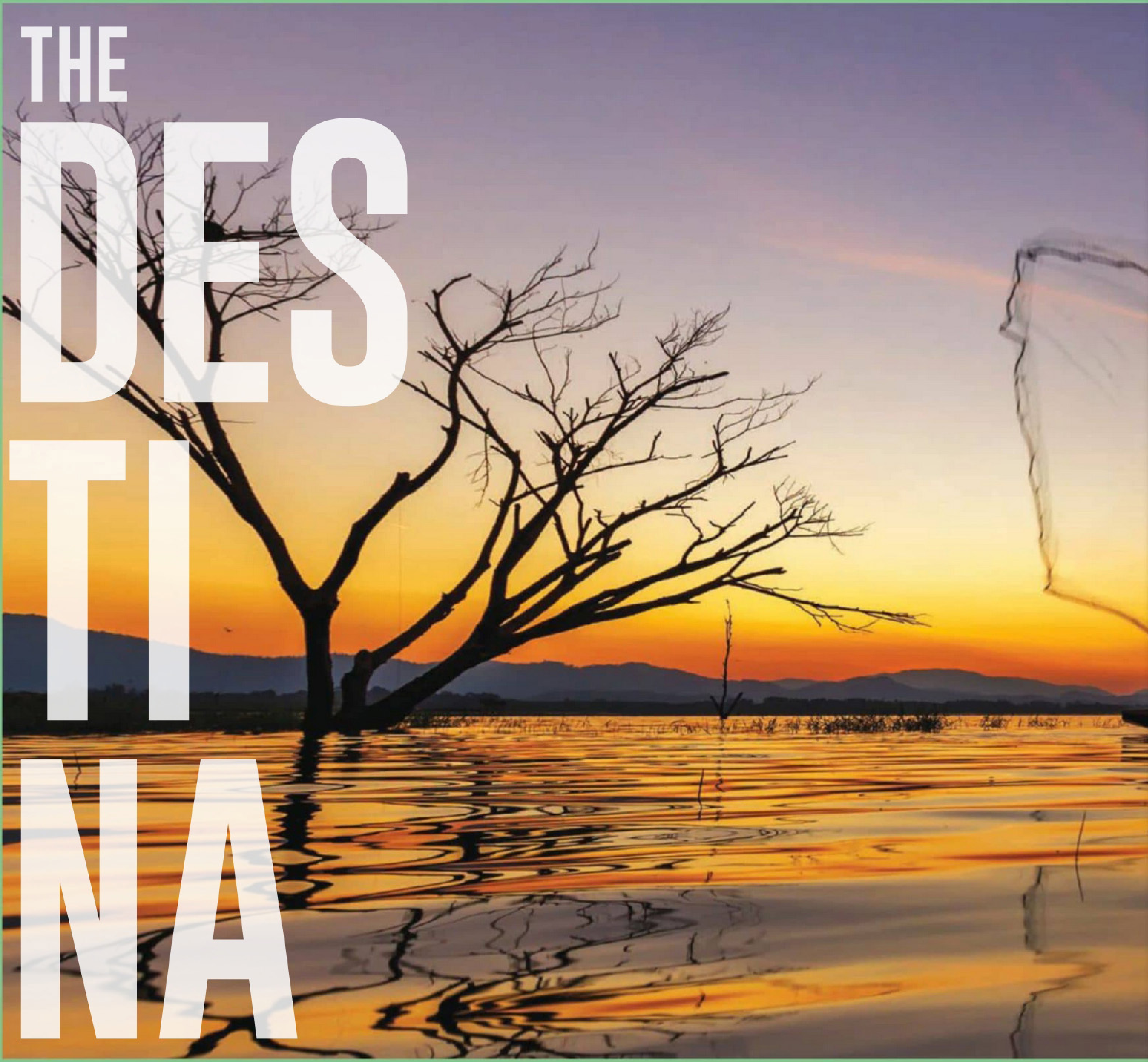
ALIONABIRUKOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK (BUILDING), TYCSONI/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES (CARPETS)

Lada cars (top) are a visible reminder of the country's time under Soviet rule; The Azerbaijan Carpet Museum (bottom) hosts the largest collection of Azerbaijani carpets in the world.

The Bibi-Heybat Mosque (top) was destroyed in 1936 and rebuilt in the 1990s, recreated in the image of its 13th-century opulence. Tea (bottom) is an essential part of Azeri life.

BORKA KISS/SHUTTERSTOCK (CAR), SAIKO3P/SHUTTERSTOCK (MOSQUE), SAIKO3P/SHUTTERSTOCK (BUILDING), KHRYSTYNA BOHUSH/SHUTTERSTOCK (TEA)

THE DESTINATION



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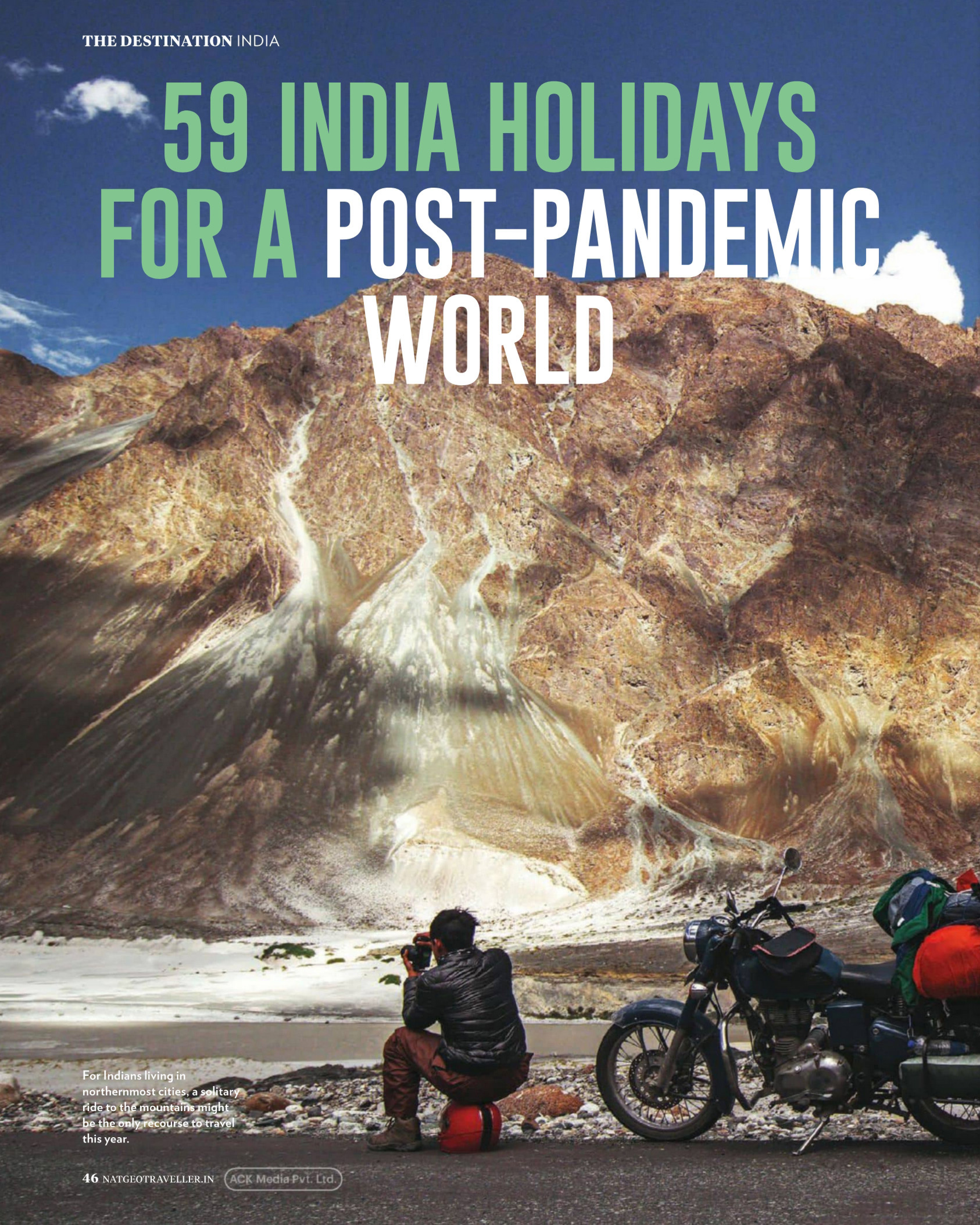
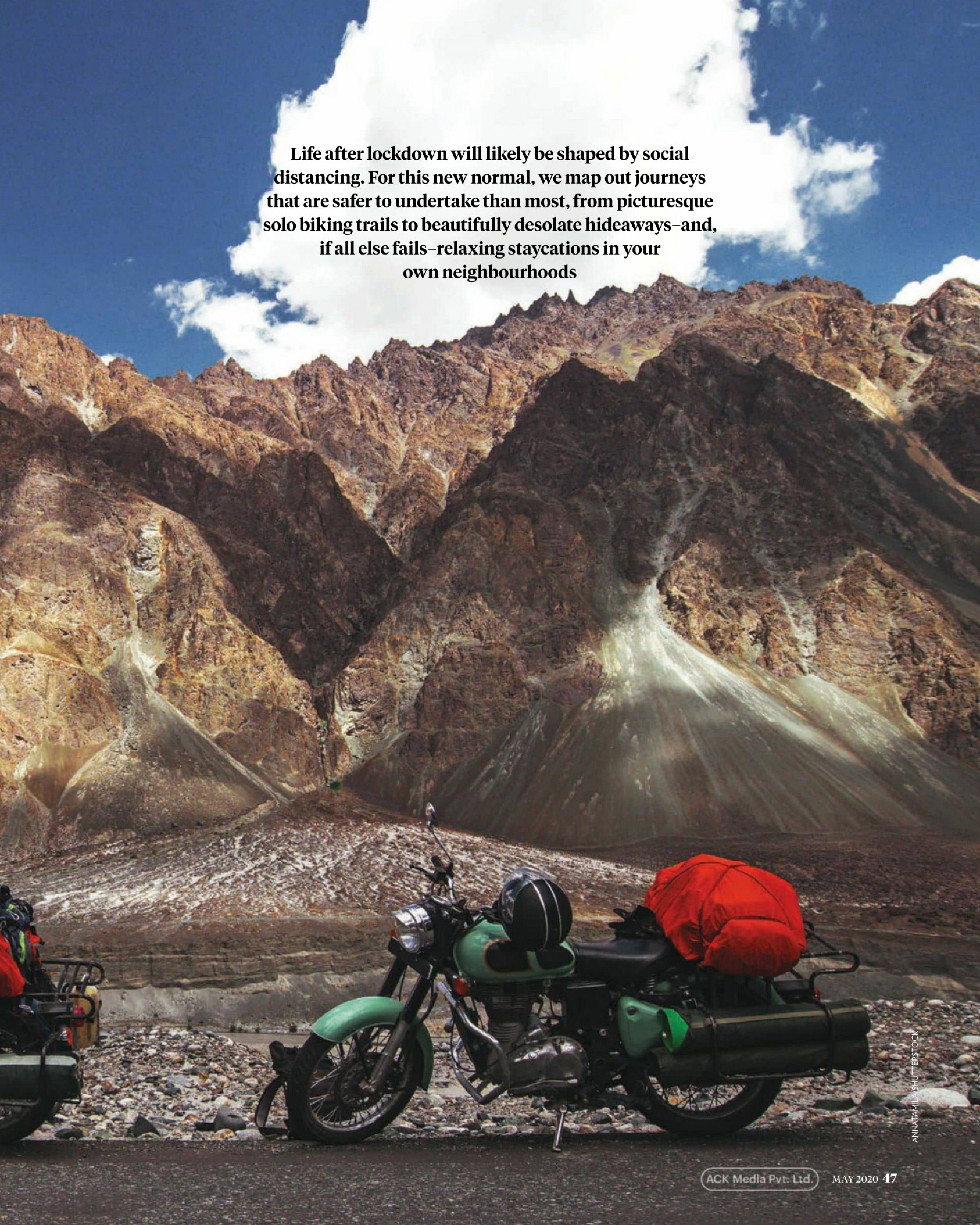
KOMKRIT RUANGPENG/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES

46 IN INDIA, 59 TRIPS FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD
66 SEEKING ART AND SPIRITUALITY IN NEW MEXICO
76 SOUTH AFRICA'S UNEXPLORED PASTURES

59 INDIA HOLIDAYS FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

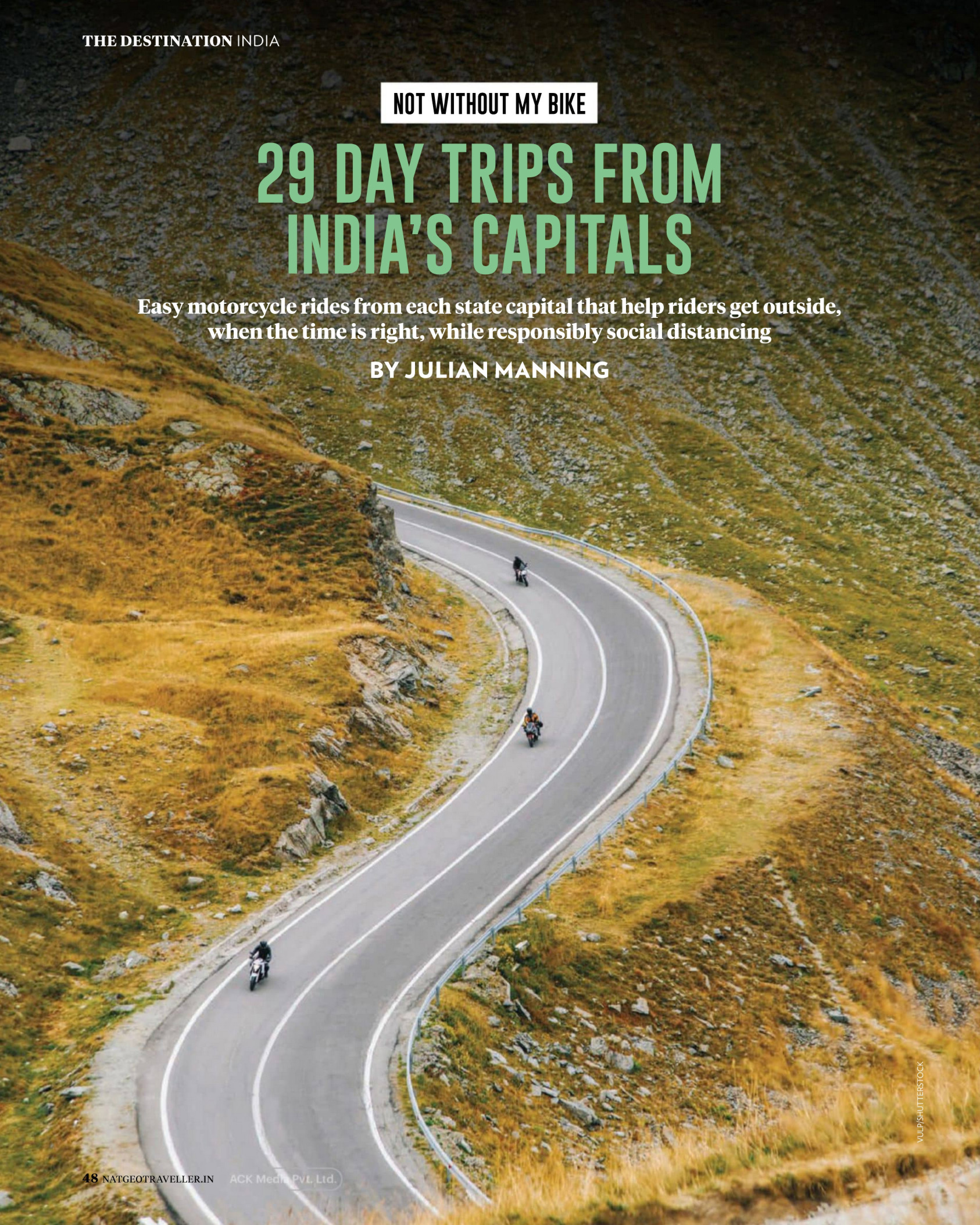


For Indians living in northernmost cities, a solitary ride to the mountains might be the only recourse to travel this year.



Life after lockdown will likely be shaped by social distancing. For this new normal, we map out journeys that are safer to undertake than most, from picturesque solo biking trails to beautifully desolate hideaways–and, if all else fails–relaxing staycations in your own neighbourhoods

ANNATAMILA/SHUTTERSTOCK



NOT WITHOUT MY BIKE

29 DAY TRIPS FROM INDIA'S CAPITALS

Easy motorcycle rides from each state capital that help riders get outside, when the time is right, while responsibly social distancing

BY JULIAN MANNING

VULP/SHUTTERSTOCK

Taking one's bike for a smooth spin out of town has been off the books for a while, but as states gradually look to open up in the coming months, we've mapped out a few easy day trips from 29 Indian capitals. All the rides are less than 150 kilometres one-way and lead to remote areas where social distancing is an easier task, allowing you and your ride to enjoy some stress-free fresh air. These aren't arduous journeys, just simple jaunts that take riders through hill country, forests, natural wonders, and lakes, and help riders stretch their legs when the opportunity allows.

Remember to pack a sandwich for a nice picnic when you arrive at your destination, and by the time you return home, you'll be right on time for afternoon tea.

BENGALURU TO NANDI HILLS (65 KILOMETRES)

For weekend warriors Nandi Hills is easily the most popular morning motorcycle ride for Bangaloreans. Of course, there are other great options a little further outside the city, such as Biligiriranga Hills and Bheemeshwari, but Nandi Hills is the perfect first ride after the lockdown eases up. Early in the morning, ease along an empty highway, until you hit the last 20 per cent of the ride, where you can enjoy the twisties in the hills as the sun rises.

MUMBAI TO LONAVALA (80 KILOMETRES)

Open up your bike on the old Mumbai–Pune highway (two-wheelers are not allowed on the new Mumbai–Pune Expressway), pacing through lush environs once you pass into the ghats. Although interaction should be kept at a minimum, picking up some fresh fruit on the ghat roads outside of Lonavala should be an uncrowded endeavour that promises a delicious reward.

DELHI TO GARHMUKTESHWAR (110 KILOMETRES)

While this trip is not as stunning as other longer rides outside of Delhi, riding along the Ganges in the early summer when there are Gangetic dolphin sightings makes this ride unique. Riders should make a point to stop at uncrowded sections of the river's banks to see if they can spot any of these majestic creatures.

CHENNAI TO PULICAT (55 KILOMETRES)

This quick ride from Chennai to Pulicat takes riders to a beautiful lake, which depending on the season, is filled with a variety of migratory birds. Enjoy zipping around country roads adjacent to the lake, but avoid taking a boat around the lake or to the barrier island called Sriharikota as a part of social distancing.

KOLKATA TO PIYALI ISLAND (70 KILOMETRES)

Known fondly as "the gateway to the Sunderbans," Piyali Island is a great motorcycle trip out of the city, though it is highly recommended to get an early start out of the city as to not get caught in traffic jams on your way back. A bridge connects the island to the mainland, so riders don't have to worry about coming in close contact with others on boats. Enjoy the greenery, loads of birds, and perhaps spot a crocodile.

JAIPUR TO SAMBHAR SALT LAKE (85 KILOMETRES)

This huge inland saltwater lake is the perfect place to do some remote trailblazing when the ground is nice and dry. Riders have free reign to enjoy a wide expanse of mud bashing all to themselves.

TRIVANDRUM TO VARKALA (40 KILOMETRES)

This short ride takes you along a beautiful snippet of Kerala's coast to one of India's best beaches, located below the cliffs of Varkala. After a stunning ride, find an empty section of the beach to take a refreshing dip.

SHILLONG TO DAWKI (80 KILOMETRES)

Let your bike rumble through pastoral vistas as you make your way to the azure waters of Dawki. Avoid renting a boat and touristy pockets of the water, and instead find a calm place to take a quick dip before heading back.

VIJAY KRISHNA/EYEEM/GETTY IMAGES

Mountian rides (facing page) allow bikers to still their minds as they glide through twists and turns; The azure waters of Dawki are a sight to see after hours on the road.

LEH TO ALCHI (65 KILOMETRES)

In the valley of the Indus River lies Alchi, a picturesque Himalayan village. Forgo walking around the village, and instead enjoy the desolate mountain faces framing the sparkling river winding through them.

HYDERABAD TO ANANTHAGIRI HILLS (80 KILOMETRES)

Drive through fluffy clouds on your way to Ananthagiri Hills. Dense flora and a smattering of fauna make up the route, along with luscious coffee plantations. If you make good time on the ride up, you may have time for a quick hike before returning back to Hyderabad.

SHIMLA TO THANEDAR (75 KILOMETRES)

Ride the cool, winding roads into Thanedar, the heart of Himachali apple country. Zip past ambling orchards full of Red Delicious apples, and enjoy clear skies cut by the jagged outlines of snow-capped peaks.

ITANAGAR TO ZIRO VALLEY (115 KILOMETRES)

Glide through pine forests, idyllic villages, and striking landscapes on the way to the quaint Ziro Valley, a World Heritage Site where the Apatani tribe resides. Given the area's terrain, even nearby rides like this one take much longer than expected, so heading to Ziro and back is a testing ride that can take up to four hours one way, even if the distance seems minimal.

PATNA TO RAJGIR (95 KILOMETRES)

Hit the road to Griddhakuta Peak, also known as Vulture Peak, and enjoy the roads as traffic winds down near Rajgir. Avoid taking the ropeway to Vishwa Shanti Stupa even though it is a single seater, as you may run into some crowds, as well as taking the walk up to Vulture Peak when there are pilgrims about. Instead, cruise the area for good vantage points to enjoy the beauty of the surrounding area unimpeded by crowds.

RAIPUR TO SIRPUR (85 KILOMETRES)

This sleepy town nestled next to the Mahana River is not only full of Vedic architectural marvels, but also some nice country roads you can ride all to yourself. Some of the roads on the outskirts of the town are almost like single tracks, passing chillies left out to dry, feisty roosters, and not much else.

PANJIM TO ALDEIAS DE SALCETE (40 KILOMETRES)

Head south from the capital to Aldeias de Salcete and prepare for typical highway driving that eases up after Margao. Soon you'll arrive at a warren of beautiful bylanes featuring paint-chipped manors and sprawling paddy fields. This is a great ride for those who just want to cruise around.

Be it sunny Goan lanes (top left), wildlife hotspots (top right), scenes of daily life (bottom right), or pristine beaches (bottom left), these bike trips bring out the best of each state.

CHANDIGARH (HARYANA) TO MORNI HILLS (30 KILOMETRES)

This quick and gorgeous ride to Morni Hills, part of the Shivalik Hills, offers riders some nice twists and turns tucked into plenty of greenery. If you're still revving for more of a ride once you arrive at Morni Hills, coast along the small roads to hug the towering terrace farms while exploring the foothills.

CHANDIGARH (PUNJAB) TO NANGAL (100 KILOMETRES)

Once you get close to Nangal, the ride becomes a relaxing escape as you wind through empty roads that are paved relatively well. Catch sight of wetlands filled with wildlife and make sure to check out the imposing Bhakra Nangal Dam built on the Sutlej River.

AIZAWL TO REIEK (30 KILOMETRES)

Even at such a short distance away, this trip will take riders around an hour to get to Reiek, a beautiful small town, as the roads are rather bumpy. The route is absolutely brimming with greenery. At Reiek, riders can park and hike up to Reiek Peak which promises views into Bangladesh on a clear day.

SRINAGAR TO DRUNG (TANGMARG; 40 KILOMETRES)

Ride through deep forest roads to Drung, where a babbling stream awaits in pristine nature. A few people still fish in these waters, enjoying the solitude and fresh air.

RANCHI TO JONHA FALLS (40 KILOMETRES)

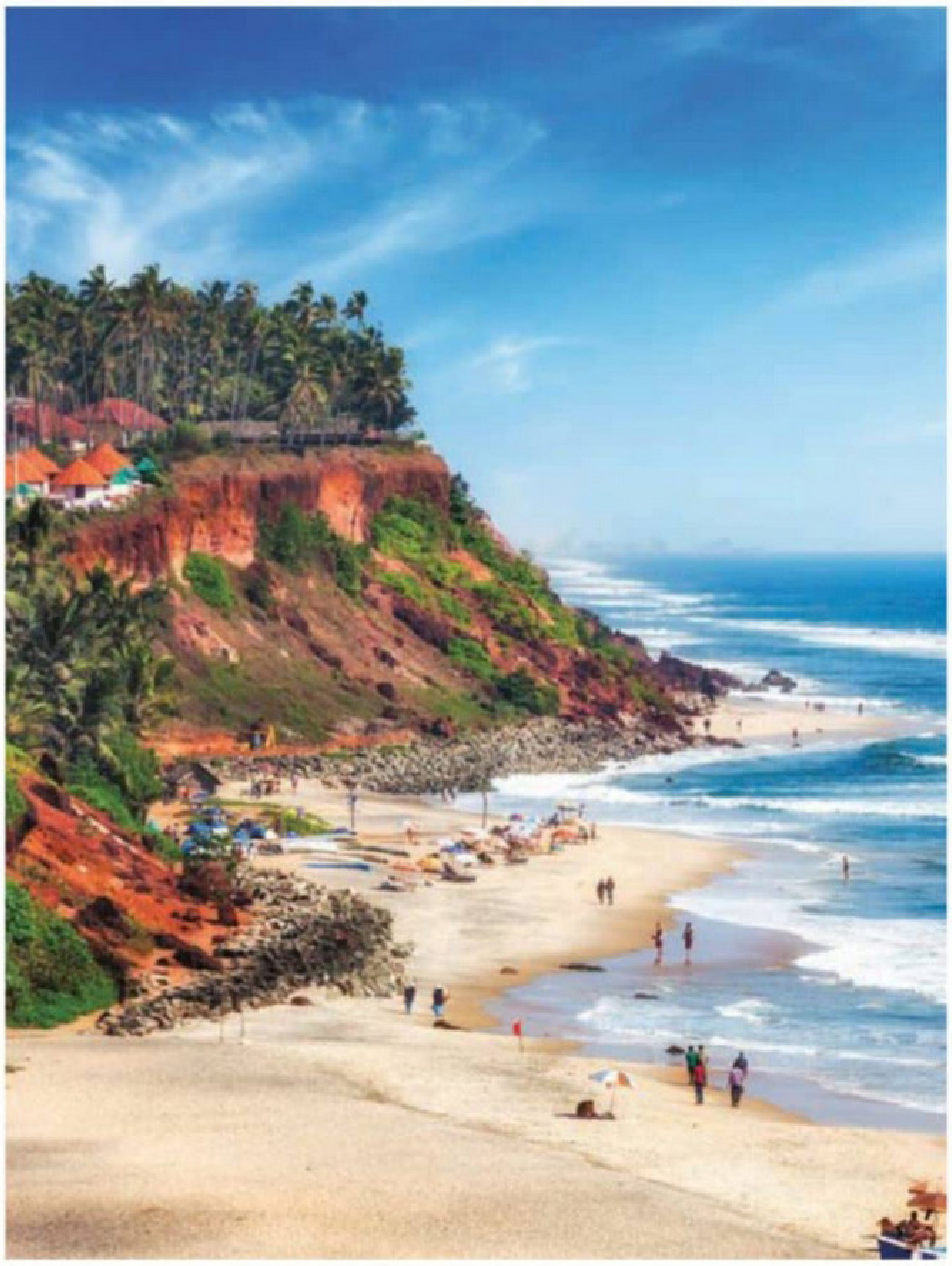
The road to the falls is decent and relatively straight, offering riders an easy toodle into the countryside.

BHOPAL TO AMARGARH (105 KILOMETRES)

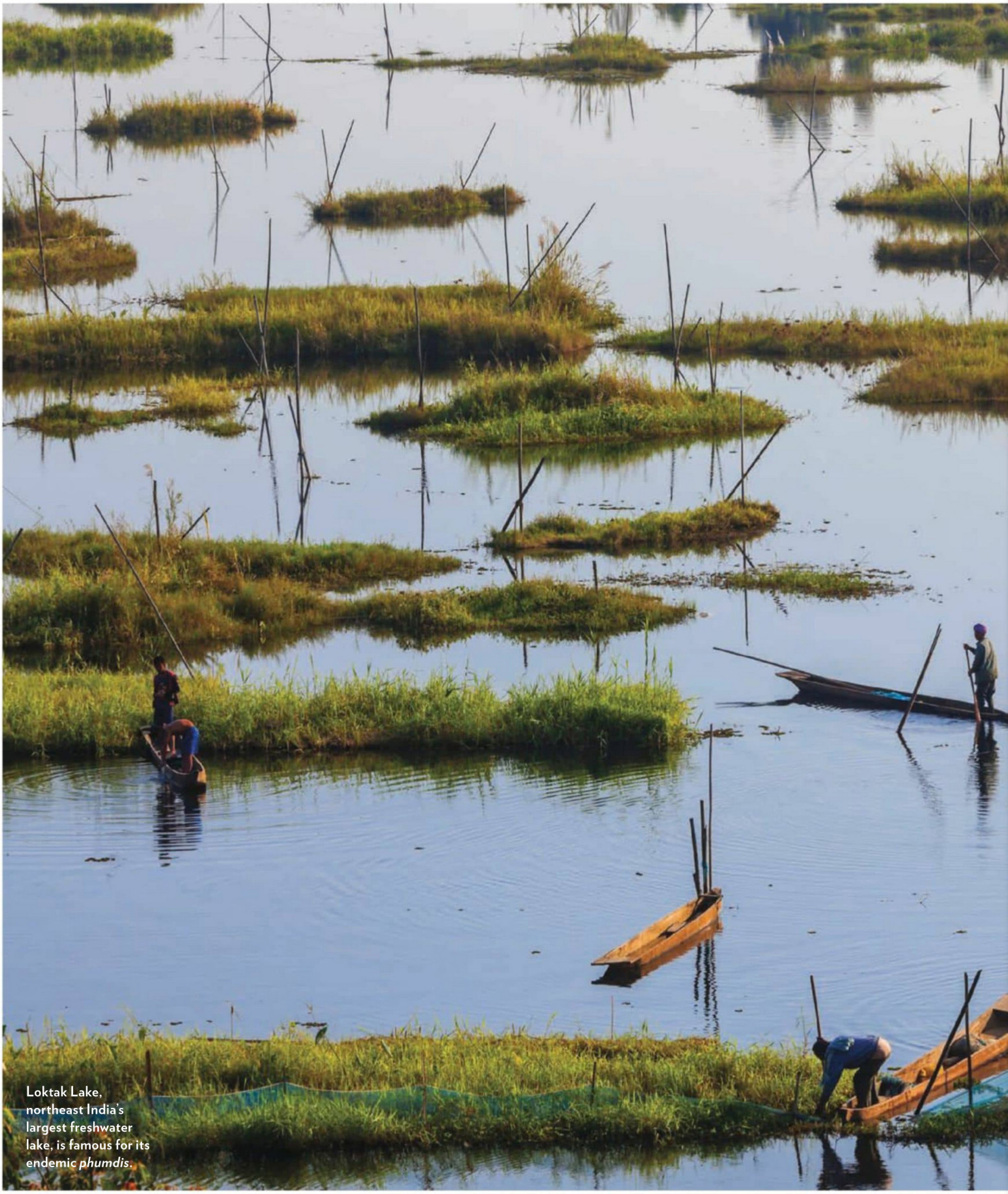
While Amargarh is an area only known to most for its waterfall, the surrounding area has a network of trails for those keen on taking their bikes off road. Some sections of the trails can get a bit rocky, so best to set out with a bike that's powerful and has plenty of clearance.

IMPHAL TO LOKTAK LAKE (50 KILOMETRES)

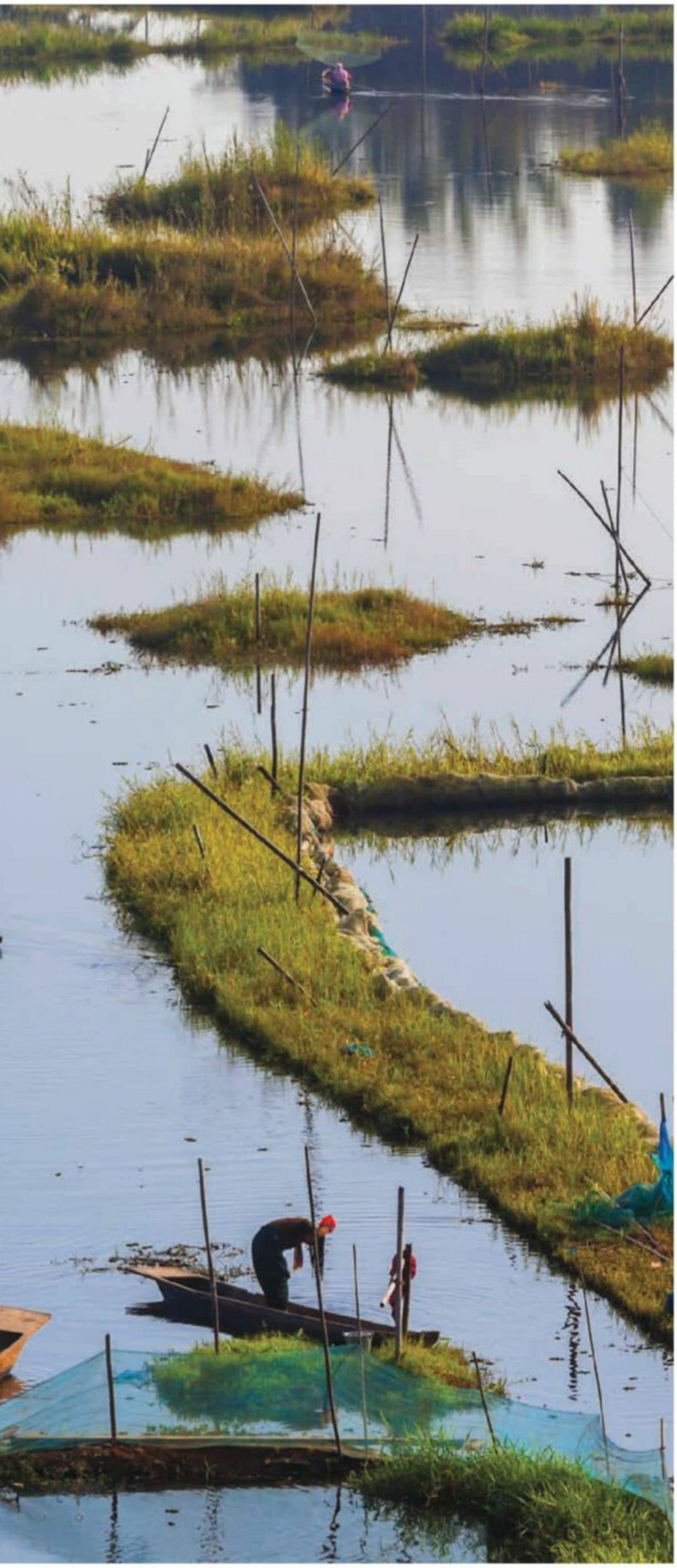
Enjoy a smashing time as you ride through perfectly blessed pastoral landscapes painted with paddy fields, rustic villages, and sacred forests. Once you reach Loktak Lake, feast your eyes on northeast India's largest freshwater lake, decorated with intricate and lush *phumdis*, a filigree of floating islands endemic to the water body.



SAIKO3P/SHUTTERSTOCK (SCOOTER), BALASUBRAMANIAN G VELU/500PX PRIME/GETTY IMAGES (BIRDS), DMITRY RUKHLENKO/SHUTTERSTOCK (BEACH), PACIFIC PRESS/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES (WOMAN)



Loktak Lake, northeast India's largest freshwater lake, is famous for its endemic *phumdis*.



PETER ADAMS/STONE/GETTY IMAGES

KOHIMA TO CHUMUKEDIMA **(70 KILOMETRES)**

The road to Chumukedima, a verdant hill station outside of Dimapur, is super well-paved at some sections, and strikingly muddy and rough in other parts, so knobby tires are a nice addition to the ride, though not necessary. The vast majority of the ride has riders wind through dense forest land.

BHUBANESWAR TO CHILIKA LAKE **(95 KILOMETRES)**

After a bit of highway driving, pass through Puri Beach, also known as Golden Beach, and enjoy the drive along the coast. Head on to Chilika Lake, which is considered to be India's largest lagoon, a waterbody often dotted with a wide variety of birds.

GANGTOK TO ZULUK **(90 KILOMETRES)**

While Gangtok has many convenient day trip options, like the sparkling glacial Tsomgo Lake, the 32 hairpin bends that twist along the mountain leading to the hamlet of Zuluk give riders the opportunity to take advantage of a really fun ride.

AGARTALA TO AMARPUR **(75 KILOMETRES)**

Ride out to one of the most picturesque picnic spots in all of Tripura. After a straightforward ride, with nice nature sections towards the end, eat a snack on the shoreline and be at peace. Be wary of taking heavy bikes across old bamboo bridges around Amarpur.

LUCKNOW TO BITHOOR **(115 KILOMETRES)**

Although some sections of the highway can be a tad rough, the route to Bithoor, a small township on the banks of the Ganga, is a solid ride. While the ancient pilgrimage site can get a tad crowded, there are plenty of areas to enjoy the setting without coming into contact with many visitors.

DEHRADUN TO DHANAULTI **(40 KILOMETRES)**

This route will you leave slack-jawed as you and your bike are enveloped in a velvety tower of deodar trees on the winding road to one of the region's smallest hill stations. While the area has many adventure attractions, those looking for their slice of solitude should check out some of the short hiking trails in the area.

GANDHINAGAR TO KANJARI DEER PARK
(45 KILOMETRES)

The ride to this deer park involves typical highway driving until riders pass Thol, when the traffic eases up quite a bit. Even when the deer park is closed, there are grazing grounds that can be seen from the rode. Riders can jump off the saddle and watch dozens of deer frolic about.

POST-LOCKDOWN CALM

11 SOULFUL SPOTS TO FORGET YOUR TROUBLES

Isolation needn't always carry the weight of lockdowns. Isolation can be all the balm you need in these stunning natural silos, where you can retreat when it is safe to do so

BY SOHINI DAS GUPTA

(INPUTS FROM SAMBIT DATTACHAUDHURI)

PRITESH BHOSLE/SHUTTERSTOCK

The wait to break free—bob along rivers and wade through wildflowers—is going to be long. But when the time comes, we'll be ready to rejuvenate. A pandemic demands staggering human resolve. If getting by from one day to another has frayed your nerves, bunched up your heart into dirty, matted knots, here are secluded places of beauty within India you can head to, when all of this is over.

IN THE NORTH

CHITKUL, HIMACHAL PRADESH

The highest and the last settlement of Himachal's Baspa valley is also one of its most serene. Perched on the right bank of the Baspa river in the Kinnaur district, life in Chitkul simmers slow and sweet, away from prying tourists who generally stop 20 kilometres short in popular Sangla. The village, as green as a sky full of parrots, opens up the view to majestic Himalayan peaks. Flowering fields of buckwheat, a staple of the region, grin pink in the harvest season. An assortment of olden temples and a monastery shine light on the village's amalgamation of faith; residents practise Hinduism, Buddhism and sometimes, a mix of both. The village offers an ideal base for several scenic treks and the meditative company of pine forests and starry skies. 250 kilometres/8 hours from Shimla by bus, Chitkul also offers **Zostel** accommodation.

NATHUAKHAN, UTTARAKHAND

A relatively new pin on the map, Nathukhan is a comely village in Uttarakhand, not far from the holiday classics of Nainital and Mukteshwar. Dressed in velveteen pleats of oak, birch, deodar and kafal trees, it boasts almost-180 degree views of the Himalayas, including the Trishul, Nanda Devi, Nilkantha, and Panchachuli peaks. Relish nippy temperature and hissing hot *shikar-bhaat* (rice with chicken/goat curry) here, with heady side-helpings of DIY nature walks and *bhang* chutney. Infrastructure is scant and vistas abundant in this village, a 65 kilometre/2.5 hour-drive from Kathgodam railway station. **Woodnotes Foreststays**, with its mud-walled rooms and *pahadi* kitchen, offers a taste of local life.

***

IN THE WEST

KHURI, RAJASTHAN

That star-gazing in the Thar Desert is a cure for taut nerves shouldn't come as a surprise, but the sweet seclusion of Khuri village, a 50 kilometre/1-hour-drive from Jaisalmer's tourist scramble, catches one unawares. Spend your afternoons scaling dunes, or chasing splatters of pomegranate-pink sun. Come nightfall you can revel in the grandeur of skies punched with silver holes, and even the Milky Way, if you're carrying a telescope. A stay at the clay-walled Badal House, run by local man **Badal Singh Ji**, offers both rustic hospitality and intimate desert excursions.

GANPATIPULE, MAHARASHTRA

A 30 kilometre/1 hour-drive from Ratnagiri railway station will take you to the sleepy Konkan town of Ganpatipule. The town's name is derived from the Hindu deity who is said to have taken abode here, and is worshiped at the 400-year-old Ganpatipule Temple centred on his vermillion, monolithic idol. White sand lines its beach, along with cobalt waters and groves of coconut trees. While a rocky terrain makes swimming at the Ganpatipule beach difficult, water sports such as paragliding, jet-skiing, snorkelling, and banana boat rides temper its tranquillity. The Jaigad fort and lighthouse offer rambling views of the Arabian Sea, and the Thibaw Palace, an insight into the region's links to India's colonial history. Drive along the coast to the Aare-Ware beach, ideal for quiet swims or walks of the solitary kind. Marinate in the afterglow of salty sunsets with a side of fish curry, kokam rice and *ambapoli* (mango pancakes). The **MTDC Beach Resort** at Ganpatipule offers reasonable accommodation.

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IN CENTRAL INDIA

BHIMBETKA, MADHYA PRADESH

A UNESCO World Heritage Site covering 10 kilometres of the Ratapani Wildlife Sanctuary, the Bhimbetka rock shelters offer a portal to our collective past. Bhimbetka boasts 760 rock shelters and caves cut into seven hills, with prehistoric rock paintings adorning the walls of 500 caves. The rock art is said to offer insights into life in the Upper Paleolithic, Mesolithic, Chalcolithic, Early historic and Medieval eras and has been compared to in those in Kakadu National Park in Australia. Although only 12 of the painted shelters are accessible to the public, inside them persists the seed of human imagination—the Boar Rock showcases the outline of a boar, "Nataraj" is the painting of a man dancing with a trident-like staff, and

Melkote in Karnataka is a treasure trove of architecture, lost in time. Facing page: Easily accessible from the Maharashtrian town of Ganpatipule, the Aare-Ware beach promises deep blue solitude.

NILA NEWSOM/SHUTTERSTOCK

the Zoo Rock depicts bison, deer, and elephants. Bhimbetka does not have any accommodation; MP Tourism recommends **Banyan Tree Farms** in Bhopal, 50 kilometres/1.5 hours by bus.

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IN THE EAST

MANGALAJODI, ODISHA

If marshlands flanked by typha and migratory birds suggest a calming visual for you, the Mangalajodi wetlands, located north of Odisha's Chilika lagoon, will manifest that dream. A birder's delight for the wealth of wildlife that inhabits its languid waters, it is also a fulfilling experience of nature for those without binoculars. Not that you will have much use of binoculars here; gliding through slender stretches of water on wooden boats made cosy with thatched canopies, you will be at arm's length of purple moorhens, ruddy shelducks, bar-tailed godwits, and other wetland beauties. Expect deep silence, ruffled only by bird calls or the sound of oars splicing open still waters. Mangalajodi village lies 70 kilometre/1.5 hour southwest of Bhubaneswar, off NH-5. **Mangalajodi Ecotourism**, a community-managed wildlife conservation venture, offers elementary lodging and boating packages.

MURGUMA, WEST BENGAL

Swaddled between the ancient Ajodhya Hills and a tributary of the river Kangsabati, Murguma village in West Bengal knows nature's soliloquy by heart. To listen in, drive 46 kilometres/1.5 hours west of Purulia station until you're ringed by red hillocks, lotus-streaked ponds, and groves of sal, bamboo, and flaming bastard teaks. Soak in the panorama at the Murguma dam, or visit the nearby tribal settlement of Charida, where generations of mask artists create flamboyant Chhau masks, used in the eponymous dance form. The wild expanses of Peacock Hill, Bamni Falls, Khairabera, Turga Falls and the Ajodhya Hill and Reserve Forest Area are some adjacent attractions. A stay at Murguma's **Palash Bitan Jungle Huts** offers basic facilities and a deluxe brush with nature.

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IN THE NORTHEAST

YUKSOM, SIKKIM

Divorced from the din at 5,840 feet, Yuksom in West Sikkim is revered as 'the meeting point of three lamas'. The name should perhaps be an indicator of the town's proximity to monasteries such as the Dubdi, Tashi Tenka, and Tashiding. Having served as the first capital of Sikkim, where the foremost *chogyal* (ruler) of the kingdom was consecrated, Yuksom's culture is best experienced in symmetry with its natural beauty; you *will* eavesdrop on the rustle of indigenous trees while visiting the Coronation Throne of Norbugang. And it is the peaceful waters of the Kathok Lake that form the backdrop of the seat of the three lamas. Vistas cannot possibly disappoint at the 'Gateway to Mt. Kangchendzongha', as pleasing hikes leading to the

Marvel at dunes untainted by overtourism in Rajsthan's Khuri (top), or visit a forest cradling a sacred coronation throne (bottom) in Yuksom, Sikkim. Facing page: Mangalajodi's bird-dotted marshes (top) are one of Odisha's hidden delights; The Bhimbetka rock shelters (bottom) in Madhya Pradesh are a reminder of human perseverance.

ROBMEADOR.COM/SHUTTERSTOCK (DESERT), NIGEL KILLEEN/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (ROCK).
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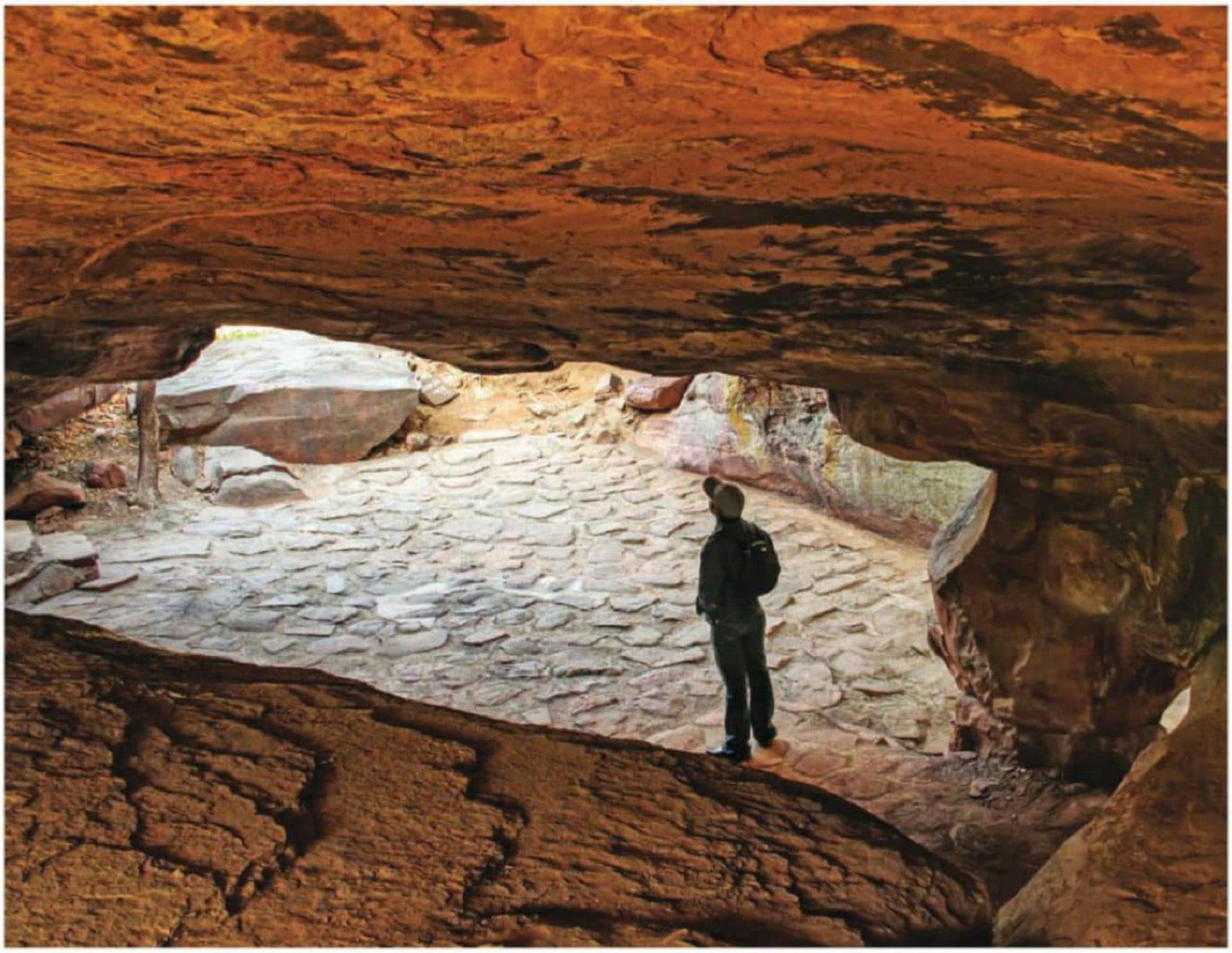

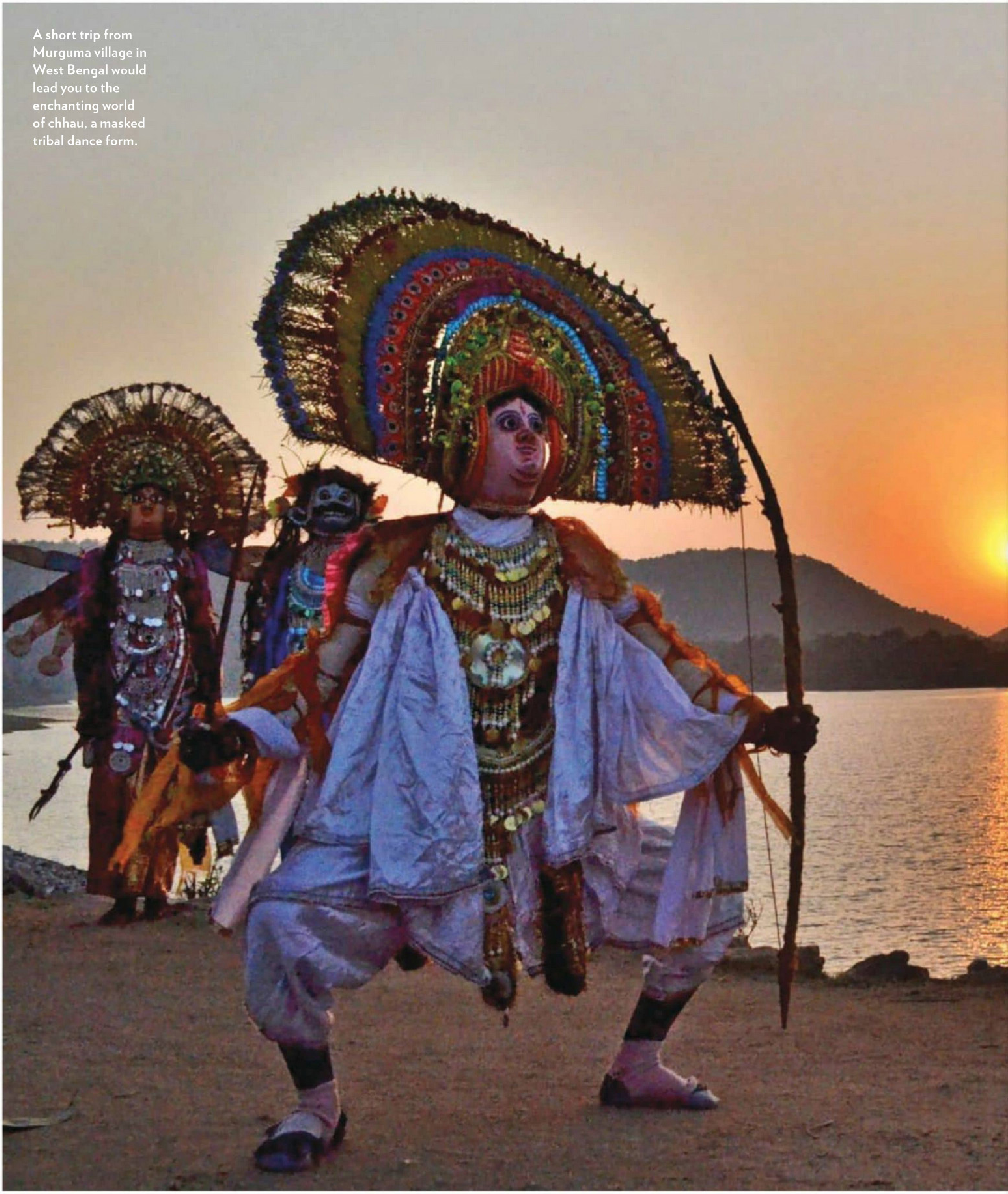

A short trip from Murguma village in West Bengal would lead you to the enchanting world of chhau, a masked tribal dance form.

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Goecha La trail or the Kangchendzongha basecamp testify. Expect farm-to-table dining at Yuksom's ample homestays, run by the local Limboo tribe. Bagdogra airport is a 160 kilometre/5 hour-drive away from Yuksom, but cabs are best availed from Siliguri Junction, half an hour from the airport.

MAWPHLANG, MEGHALAYA

Drive 26 kilometres/40 minutes southwest of Shillong to reach a junction of Scotland-ish greens, and a village whose name translates to "grassy stone." The name is a nod to the many monoliths in the culturally distinct East Khasi region. Mawphlang is also the gateway to the Mawphlang Sacred Grove, one of the biggest sacred forests in Meghalaya. The forest, stitched together by an intertwined network of flora and medicinal herbs, has but one rule. Nothing can be taken out of the enclosure, believed to be home to the local deity—not even a dead log. Tune into the harmony of nature and ancient faith, and learn about indigenous culture at the Khasi Heritage Village, a model village located opposite the grove. The historic David Scott Trail stretches from Mawphlang to Ladmawphlang village, a system of woods, rocks, waterfalls, bridges, and the beautiful Umiam river. A stay at the family-run **Maple Pine Farm** allows ample access to the attractions.

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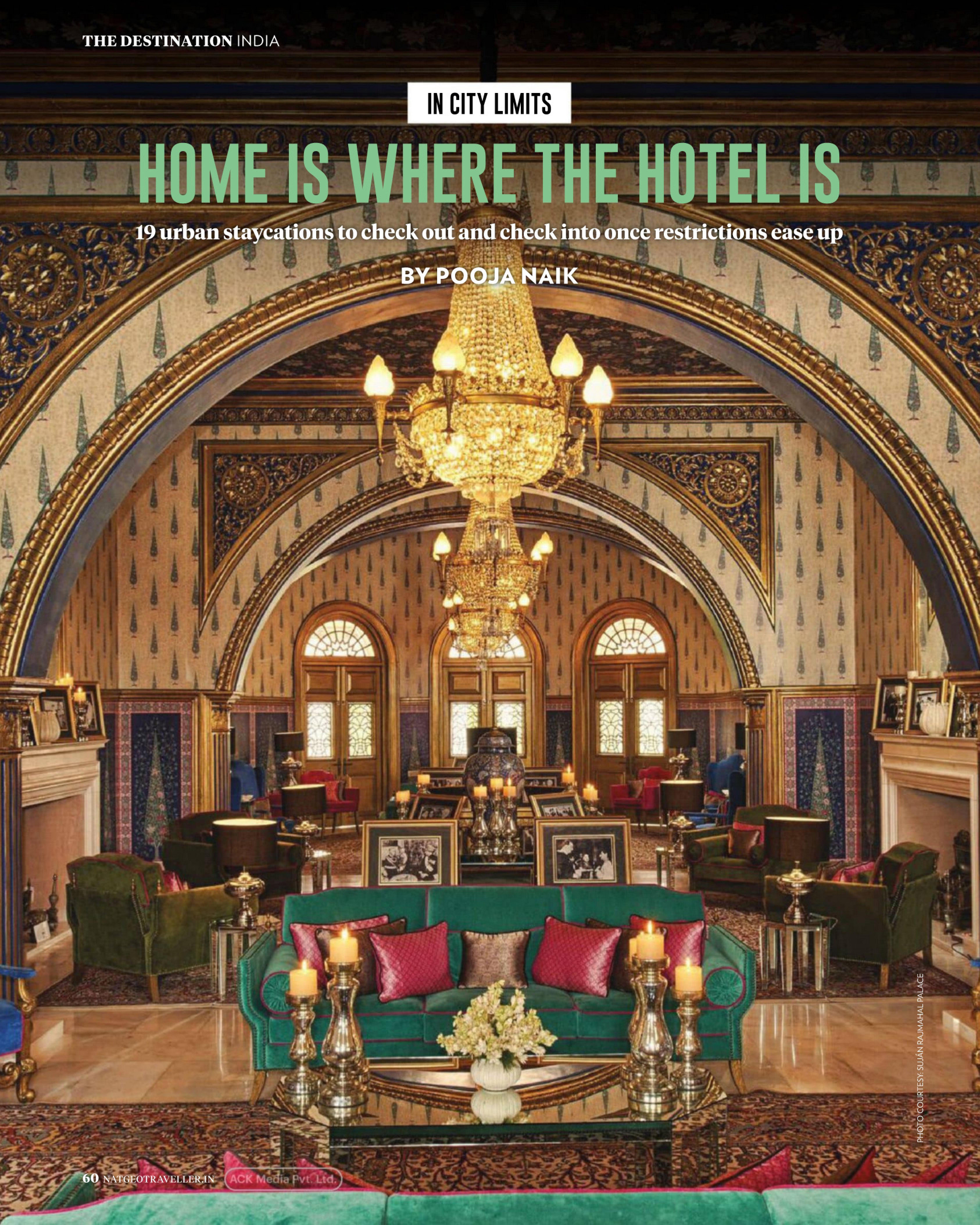
IN THE SOUTH

MELKOTE, KARNATAKA

Sunsets have a mystical quality in monument-riddled Melkote, but they do nothing to accelerate time. If you've ever wanted a ticket back to lost kingdoms, glimpses of Hoysala-era architecture in this hilltop town offer a fix. Trust the slowness in the air as you fritter away days that begin with plates of special *puliyogare* (tamarind rice) and end amid the stunning stucco sculptures of Cheluvanarayana Swamy temple. The dramatic ruins of Raya Gopura and a smattering of stone pavilions and *maths* accentuate the sense of time-warp. Small-scale ***dharamshalas*** and **lodges** are common in the town easily reached by bus or cab from both Bengaluru and Mysore.

VALIYAPARAMBA, KERALA

Valiyaparamba is a fishing island in Kasaragod district. Separated from mainland by the Tejaswini river, the secluded isle—about 62 kilometres/1.5 hour by road from Kunnur International Airport—houses the Valiyaparamba Backwaters, third-largest in Kerala. Made accessible by a bridge, an alternative way to reach the island is to take a ferry from Kottappuram or Edayilakkad. Once there, hop aboard a traditional *kettuvallam* (houseboat) to glide through placid waters, swirling in native flora and fauna. To the west of the island, the Valiyaparamba beach is serene. Fish using rustic tools, sample seafood, and soak in the cool breeze of coconut lagoons. 30 kilometres/one hour-drive away, the Bekal Fort affords heart-stopping views of the Arabian Sea. The Tyndis Mangrove Trails, 10 kilometres from the island, offer a plethora of hiking, boating and birdwatching activities. Kerala Tourism recommendations for stays include **Kavvayi Beach House** and **Avisa Island Homestay**, among others.



IN CITY LIMITS

HOME IS WHERE THE HOTEL IS

19 urban staycations to check out and check into once restrictions ease up

BY POOJA NAIK

PHOTO COURTESY: SUJAN RAJMAHAL PALACE

In the last two months, restaurants have shuttered and the vast majority of hotel remain closed, some permanently. But the surviving ones will undergo severe safety protocols to meet WHO guidelines. Thermal screening, background checks of guests, social distancing within premises, mandatory use of masks and gloves, installation of sanitisers, digital restaurant reservations and check-ins have been implemented across the board. While travelling a great distance seems a long time away, here are luxury retreats and boutique stays that one can check out and check into without leaving their cities post the lockdown.

MUMBAI

THE TAJ MAHAL PALACE

The heritage hotel is an architectural marvel, iconic to Mumbai. Its prime address in Colaba—with views of Gateway of India—is both a cause for envy, and a strategic location. Having opened in 1903, the 285 room-property has hosted eminent personalities from the globe over and was the site of Lord Mountbatten's last speech before he left India. *(Doubles from ₹9,500, including breakfast; www.tajhotels.com)*

SOHO HOUSE MUMBAI

The 23rd Soho House property sits at the edge of Juhu beach. The 11-storey building serves expansive views of the Arabian Sea and is a hotspot for Bollywood bigwigs. The menu features Indian and contemporary elements and the rooftop bar shares space with a pool. Intricate details such as lampshades made with vintage saris, sisal carpets, and artworks and photographs by Indian artists lend the 38-room property a personal touch. *(Doubles from ₹10,500; www.sohohouse.com)*

DELHI

THE MANOR

The two-decade-old The Manor is tucked inside a tree-lined gated colony. Post pandemic, the two-storey property surrounded by an acre of greenery is likely to introduce a "work from hotel" setup with amenities such as a speedy Wi-Fi to break the monotony of a quintessential corporate space. *(Doubles from ₹12,000; www.themanordelhi.com)*

THE LEELA PALACE NEW DELHI

Opulent is an apt description for The Leela Palace. The five-star property is both modern and ostentatious with Indian and European furnishings. Think Persian rugs, silk sofas, grand chandeliers, and a rooftop pool that overlooks the lushness of Diplomatic Enclave. Expect amplification of safety levels with UV sanitisation across all public spaces in the premises. *(Doubles from ₹15,000; www.theleela.com)*

KOLKATA

CALCUTTA BUNGALOW

The six-room heritage bungalow celebrates a bygone era of Kolkata from the early 20th century. Most items bought and refurbished are from different parts of the city. There are the louvred windows repurposed as installations in the courtyard and bedside tables, and then there's the charm of old but functional typewriters in each room. On the menu are hearty Bengali fare such as *radha ballabhi* (lentil-stuffed Indian flatbread), *luchi-alur dom* (aloo-puri), and *rosogolla*. Hour-long heritage walks are complimentary for guests. *(Doubles from ₹5,000, including breakfast; calcuttabungalow.com)*

BODHI TREE

Located in South Kolkata's Swiss Park, the property—started by a mother-son duo in 2007—pegs itself as a boutique guest house and serviced apartment. It has an on-site garden, art gallery, patio library and a café. The property uses a Buddhist approach to disinfect spaces with bay leaves, camphor and sage. *(Doubles from ₹2,000, including breakfast; special discounts available for female travellers and guests of long duration stays; www.bodhitreekolkata.com)*

ITC ROYAL BENGAL

Located adjacent to ITC Sonar, ITC Royal Bengal brings together nuances of culture, art and music. Besides 456 rooms and suites, on offer are: a jazz bar playing live gigs; six restaurants serving Indian and international delicacies; and a luxury spa. *(www.itchotels.in)*

RISHIKESH

TAJ RISHIKESH RESORT & SPA

Spread out across 12 acres, Taj's year-old venture in Rishikesh is made for social distancing. The retreat is set at the foothills

The royal SUJÁN Rajmahal Palace in Jaipur (facing page) and the English-style Casa Cottage (top) in Bengaluru are prime heritage properties that exude a bygone-era charm.

PHOTO COURTESY: CASA COTTAGE

of the Himalayas and overlooks the Ganga river. Garhwal influences are felt throughout the 79-room property, be it the *kath-khuni* architecture, slate flooring or traditional meals with locally sourced ingredients. *(Doubles from ₹17,000, including breakfast; www.tajhotels.com)*

ROSEATE GANGES

Roseate Ganges is located near the quiet neighbourhood of Shivpuri, the launch site for river rafting. The luxury property offers 16 villas, each opening to a private balcony looking over the Ganga valley. Besides the Garhwali and Kumaoni cuisines served at the hotel, on the menu at the wellness retreat are rejuvenating yoga and spa sessions. *(www.roseatehotels.com)*

HIMALAYAN HIDEAWAYS (OPENSKY RESORT)

The forest-themed lodge overlooks river rapids. Its quiet, serene surroundings are huge draws, and the eight-room property is an ideal base for wellness and adventure seekers. *(Doubles from ₹9,200; www.himalayanhideaway.in)*

JAIPUR

SUJÁN RAJMAHAL PALACE

Wes Anderson meets imperialism at this former royal guesthouse of Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II of Jaipur. Sea blue, fuchsia and indigo wallpapers bathe the cavernous interiors of the 1729-built property. Marble makes up the grand staircase, Art Deco furniture is peppered throughout and greenery is everywhere. The 13 rooms and suites have played host to dignitaries like Queen Elizabeth, Lord Mountbatten and Jackie Kennedy, who now have suites named in their honour. *(Doubles from ₹55,000; thesujanlife.com)*

SAMODE HAVELI

Live like a royal at Samode Haveli, a traditional Indo-Saracenic mansion flanked by gardens and apartments arranged around a series of intimate courtyards. When the property was built 175 years ago, it was the residence of the Samode rulers. Today, their descendants still occupy the heritage space, and guests are invited to stay in former royal apartments and suites. *(Doubles from ₹9,500; www.samode.com)*

28 KOTHI

The boutique guesthouse—owned by a jewellery designer and built by a French architect—is centrally located within Civil Lines. The artistic collaboration lends itself a homey touch. Its lush garden, sunlit terraces, quiet reading nooks, and farm fresh organic feats offer a world detached from the one outside. *(Doubles from ₹7,500, including breakfast; www.28kothi.com)*

CHENNAI

AVENUE 11 BOUTIQUE RESIDENCES

The pocket-friendly stay is situated in Poes Garden, a posh

Clockwise from top left: Poolside basking at The Postcard Moira, Goa; Art spaces at Bodhi Tree, Kolkata; Meditation on the banks of the Ganga at Himalayan Hideaways, Rishikesh; High tea at The Leela Palace, Delhi.

PHOTO COURTESY: THE POSTCARD MOIRA (POOL), PHOTO COURTESY: THE LEELA PALACE (INTERIOR)
FACING PAGE: PHOTO COURTESY: BODHI TREE (PAINTINGS), PHOTO COURTESY: HIMALAYAN HIDEAWAYS (MAN)

28 Kothi in Jaipur is minimalistic in approach. Its garden spaces are ideal for lunching and lounging.

PHOTO COURTESY: 28 KOTHI

residential neighbourhood in the heart of the city with close proximity to shopping centres, temples and embassy consulates. Until the lockdown lifts, the property is only catering to stranded guests. *(Doubles from ₹2,950, including breakfast; call 044 4218 2000)*

HANU REDDY RESIDENCES POES GARDEN

Also located in Poes Garden, the eponymous Hanu Reddy Residences is a tree-flanked, six-decade old family home converted into a boutique stay. The 30-room property is spread across three bungalows and shares the lane with Rajinikanth's address. The management often gets requests to take a personal appointment with the celebrity. The rooms are sanitised and left unoccupied for 72 hours post-checkout and 24 hours prior to check-in. *(Doubles from ₹4,500, including breakfast; www.hanureddyresidences.com)*

BENGALURU

CASA COTTAGE

Nestled in a bylane in Richmond Town, Casa Cottage is an English-style bed-and-breakfast dating back to 1915. The 18 room-stay is run by an Indo-French couple and is one of the few pet-friendly options in the city. *(Doubles from ₹3,300, including breakfast; www.casacottage.com)*

THE RITZ-CARLTON, BANGALORE

The Ritz-Carlton, Bangalore is an urban retreat whose swanky offerings include a Mercedes-Benz limousine service. The hotel has 277 rooms and its corridors and public spaces are amped up with 1,280 sculptures and paintings by mostly Indian, but also Vietnamese, Cuban and American artists. Grills and kebabs are big hits at Riwaz, the in-house Indian kitchen. *(Doubles from ₹12,500, including breakfast and a five-course set meal for a couple; www.ritzcarlton.com)*

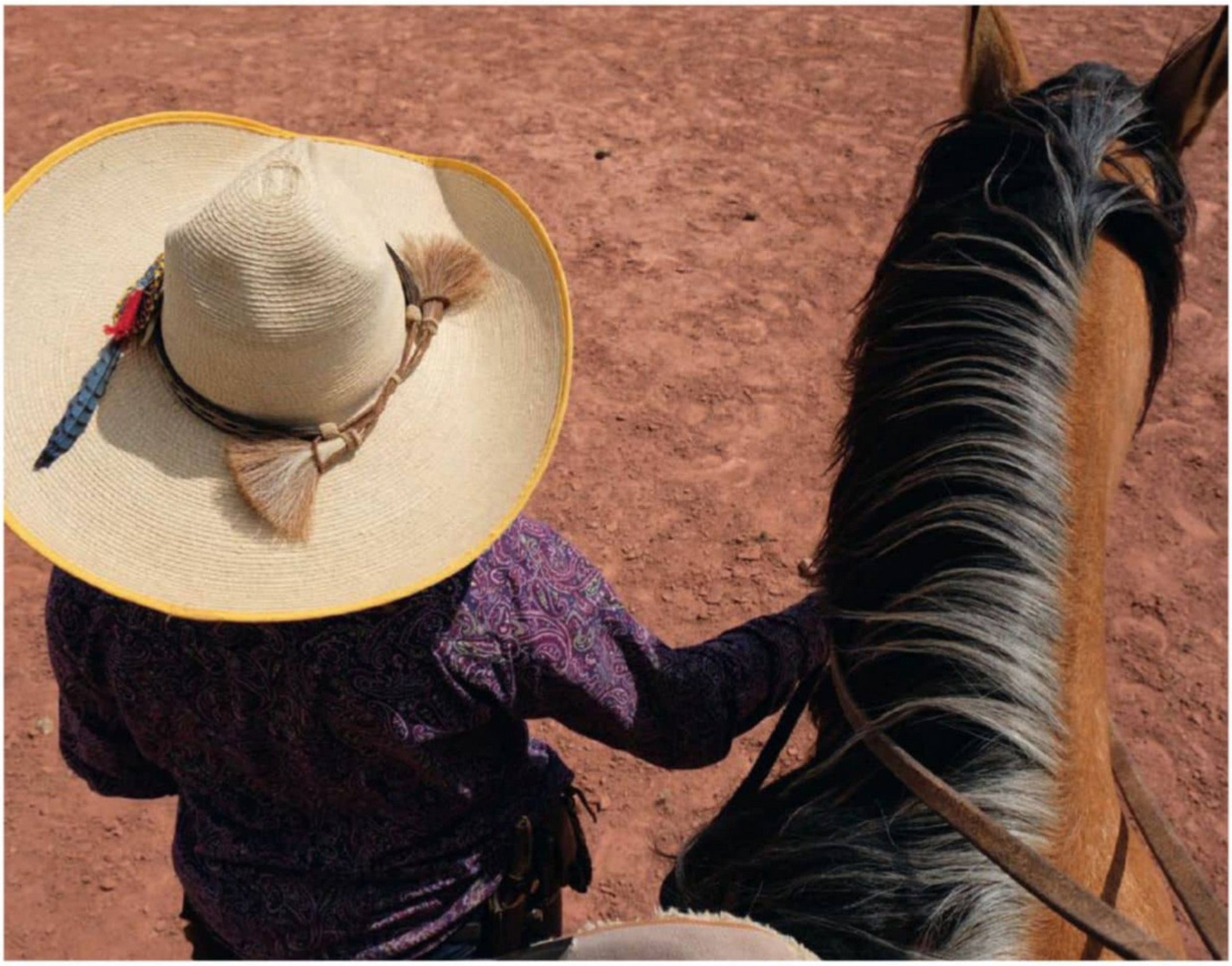
NORTH GOA

SOL DE GOA

Located close to Candolim and Sinquerim beach, Sol De Goa is a luxury heritage hotel. Designed by Tarun Tahiliani, the hotel offers 21 suites and rooms that overlook two pools and paddy fields. While the sunny state has plenty to offer (think whisky tours, kite surfing and fishing), sometimes, lounging by the poolside or digging into portions of Goan prawn curry and *chicken cafreal* is all the comfort one needs. *(Doubles from ₹5,500, including breakfast; www.soldegoa.com)*

THE POSTCARD MOIRA

In Moira, a sleepy village with lush banana plantations and colourful houses, lies The Postcard, one of the chain's three Goan properties. Its surroundings are a far cry from the state's touristy front. The 214-year-old restored ancestral home has nine rooms with four-poster beds, brass fittings and statement lamps. The dining options are quintessentially Goan, and the semolina fried version of Moidechim Kelim (Moira banana) is a must-try. *(Doubles from ₹18,500, including breakfast; www.postcardresorts.com)* ▮



ONCE UPON A TIME IN NEW MEXICO

The soaring canyons and sagebrush plains of northern New Mexico have attracted artists, spiritual seekers and free thinkers for over a century. A road trip through the high desert—encountering a hippy commune, artists' studios, futuristic eco-homes and a Benedictine monastery—uncovers the weird, wild and wonderful soul of the American Southwest

BY **AMELIA DUGGAN**

AMELIA DUGGAN, JEN JUDGE

IT'S POSSIBLE TO GO YEARS—OR A WHOLE LIFETIME—WITHOUT CONSIDERING OUR INFINITESIMAL PLACE IN THE

VASTNESS

But in the desert of New Mexico, existential revelations seem to come thick and fast. It's dusk in the Chama River Canyon. I've padded uphill from my guest quarters, through a meditation garden decorated with the Stations of the Cross, to join my hosts in their chapel. Soft light streams in through the patchwork of windowpanes, entombing a gory carving of Christ in a grid of radiance and shade. Black-robed Benedictine monks—some wizened, some fresh-faced, many occupying the years in between—chant psalms from the shadowy transepts. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." One monk wafts a thurible around the central altar, taking steady steps. "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters." Finials of sweet-scented smoke wind languorously through the beams of light.

Outside the tall windows, a sliver of a moon rises over the canyon in a wan, cornflower-blue sky—the last vestiges of a blistering summer's day. The colours of the landscape slowly intensify, emphasising russet veins in the rockface—sediment laid down by a powerful river millennia ago. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," the monks sing. I've now completely lost my place in the hymn book. All I can think about is the improbability of my being here.

I don't just mean this in the metaphysical sense. Staying at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, the most remote in the Western Hemisphere, is one of the more outlandish travel experiences of my life. It's a hard journey to reach the monks—their off-grid home sits at the end of a 13-kilometre red dirt track outside the pit-stop town of Abiquiu, which is a two-hour drive from the state capital, Santa Fe. Despite my firm agnosticism, I've come to sample the solitude and beauty of the monastery; the monks welcome people of all faiths and no faith.

I'm invited to dine with them, to labour in the gardens alongside them during the morning work period, and to attend—if I wish—their nine daily church services. The welcome literature also encourages me to join them in a commitment to contemplative silence.

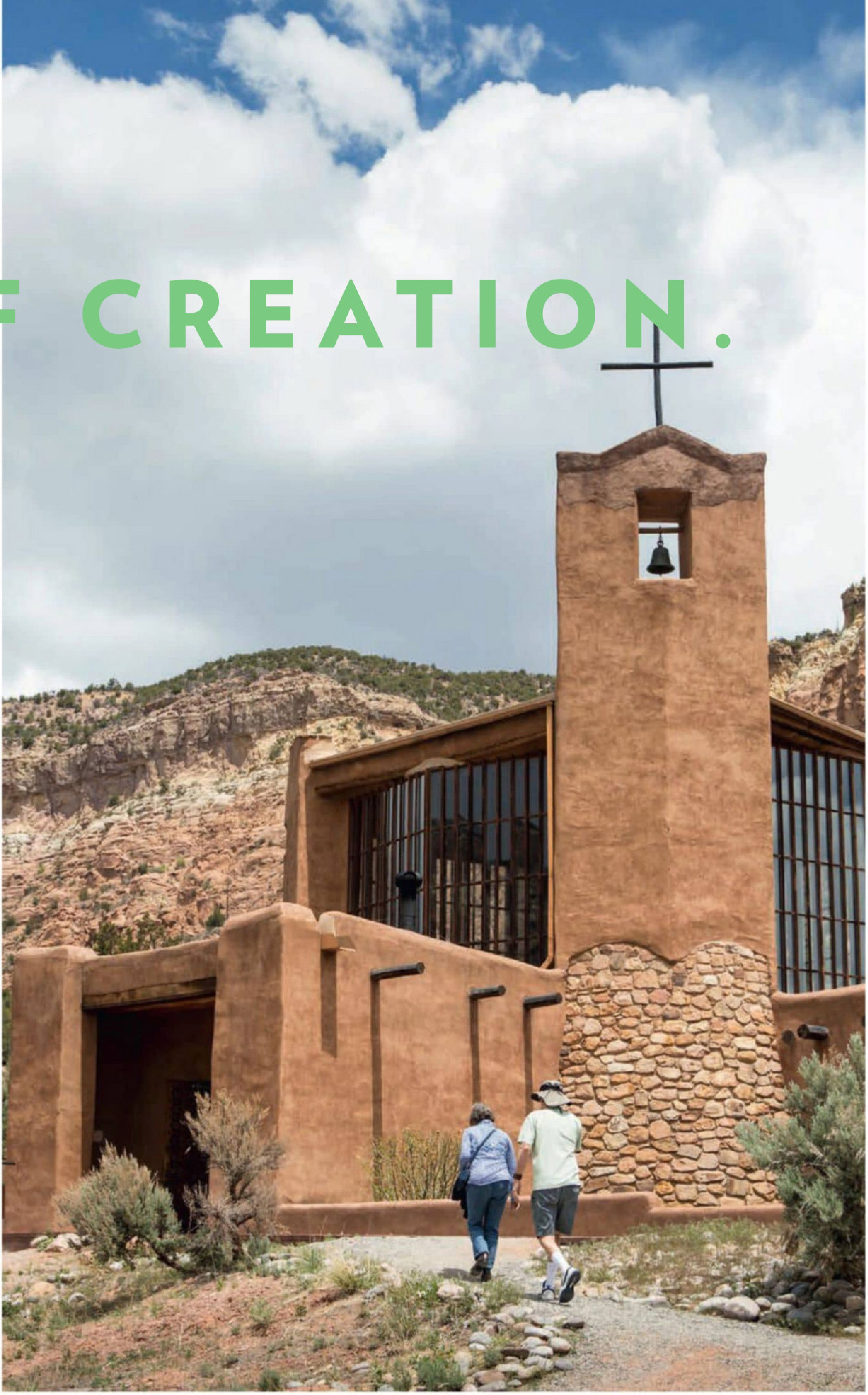
The local crickets, however, have agreed to no such terms; as I return down the hill to bed, their deafening chorus adds texture to the still, black night and, later, seeps into my dreams.

When the steady clang of a bell rings out for 4 a.m. vigils and I shuffle blearily back towards the chapel, the darkness of the valley has deepened. Overhead, the entire cosmos is lit up: layer upon layer of distant galaxies and burning suns—a ceiling that puts the Sistine Chapel's to shame. I reach the steps but, instead of slipping into a pew, I sit outside to watch the stars. Yellow candlelight glows through the cracks in the door behind me; the monks' ethereal Gregorian chanting spills out into the empty canyon. It feels divine.

"They say the deeper you go into the desert, the more you'll be sought out. There's a lure, a fascination," Abbot Christian tells me on the morning of my departure. It's the first and only conversation of my stay; one I requested in low whispers from the monk on hospitality duty. The abbot, who joins me on a garden bench, surprises me by being both charming and gregarious—not at all severe or solemn, as I'd imagined. He repeatedly steers the conversation towards '80s movies and The Beatles; I repeatedly steer it back to the desert. "It's a strong tradition in monasticism, of course," he says. "The earliest monks went out into the Egyptian desert. For the solitude, the quiet, the beauty." Abbot Christian pauses and looks out over the flowerbeds and modest graveyard to the amphitheatre of

Monastery of Christ in the desert (right);
Previous spread: Cowgirl leading a horse (left) ahead of trail ride at Ghost Ranch; Highway 76 (right), known as the High Road, en route to Taos.

OF CREATION.



JEN JUDGE

Intergalactic Bread Com
& Space Sau

AMELIA DUGGAN

"IT'S SOMETHING THAT'S IN THE AIR, IT'S JUST DIFFERENT. THE SKY IS DIFFERENT, THE STARS ARE DIFFERENT, THE WIND IS DIFFERENT"
— GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

grasslands and rock spires beyond. "This was created over aeons of time," he says pensively, echoing my own thoughts. "Man can hardly fathom it."

The Benedictines aren't the only ones to find inspiration and solace in this ancient landscape. When I arrive at my rustic cottage at Ghost Ranch, the legendary retreat and education centre an hour's drive east of the monastery, the smattering of people I encounter around the main compound seems to have been plucked from a circus. A bare-chested man juggles bean bags; a troupe of blindfolded women are attempting to circle a cottonwood tree; and tiny children dressed in tie-dye rough-and-tumble on the scrubby lawn. "We attract a lot of artists. A lot of solo travellers too. Most people are on their own private journeys," Karen Butts, the tours and education manager, explains. "This remote corner has always attracted interesting characters."

One of the best known of these characters was 20th-century American painter Georgia O'Keeffe, who fled the patriarchal confines of New York in the '40s and made this 21,000-acre estate her home and her muse. Perdenal, a narrow mesa 14 kilometres to the south, was her favourite subject. "It's my private mountain. God told me if I painted it enough I could have it," O'Keeffe once joked. As with the monks, people made long pilgrimages to seek out O'Keeffe in the desert; guests at her humble cottage included artists Frida Kahlo and Andy Warhol, and the psychiatrist Carl Jung.

I head out to explore more of the ranch on horseback, a set of watercolour paints tucked into my saddlebag in case inspiration strikes. Three tough-as-nails Texan cowgirls run the ranch stables (one vice-like handshake cracks all my knuckles), and they lead our small party with the flair and swagger of rodeo pros. It's wild, wild country. Red dust streams from our horses' hooves as we navigate dried riverbeds, passing trees mangled by lightning; I feel like we've left the planet, not just the homestead. Threatening clouds roll in, darkening the land. Around us, large ravens croak murderously.

Our guides lean into the atmosphere, telling spooky tales of slaughtered cattle poachers and buried treasure, and the legend of Vivaron, a giant mythical rattlesnake that was said to curl around the base of nearby Orphan Mesa. The tour segues into palaeontology (some of the most significant Triassic dinosaur finds continue to be made beneath the ground here), touches on movies (it was a location in *Indiana Jones And The Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull*, as well as a number of Westerns) and concludes with some showstopping geology. "See those two mesas in the distance," Rachel says as we dismount to rest our horses. "Five million years ago, they made up the sides of a supervolcano, maybe 20,000-feet high, until it exploded with the force of three nuclear bombs." It's a chilling metric to choose, an allusion to the state's role in the birth of the atomic age: the first ever A-bomb was developed in nearby Los Alamos and detonated in an area south of here. It's a reminder that the desert doesn't only bring out the best in mankind.

A sudden clap of thunder makes the horses buck and whinny, and a burst of rain soaks us all to the skin, releasing the rich scents of juniper bushes, minerally dust and the horses' sweat. On the canyon walls, pastel yellows and mauves transform into the colour of angry bruises. But then, as quickly as it started, the storm abates; the clouds part and the light returns.

OUT OF THIS WORLD

In northern New Mexico, all roads lead to Santa Fe. It's always been that way. Since its founding as a Spanish colony in 1610, the city has been a crossroads for major trade routes—it was one of the northern termini of the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro from Mexico City and the start of the Santa Fe Trail, a wagon route that stretched across the Great Plains to Missouri. The result, perhaps unsurprisingly, is that the city—the second oldest in the U.S.—is a melting pot of cultures, producing food, architecture and art unlike that found anywhere else in the country. It's the latter that Santa Fe particularly prides itself on; it's said there's a greater concentration of artists here than in any other U.S. city. I lose count of the number of galleries and museums I pass as I wander through the Canyon Road arts district, ending up in the heart of the low-rise, adobe-style historic centre.

On first impression, Santa Fe strikes me as unnervingly polished: the leafy streets, with their uniform heritage aesthetic and eye-wateringly expensive boutiques, jar with the authenticity and rawness of life in the

Clockwise from top: Stables at Ghost Ranch; baker at Santa Fe Farmers' Market; vintage cowboy boots on sale at Kowboyz, Santa Fe.

**La Fonda on the Plaza hotel (left), Santa Fe; tacos (right) served at La Plazuela at La Fonda restaurant.
Facing page: Doorway to El Santuario de Chimayó, a popular pilgrimage site during holy week.**

JEN JUDGE

desert. But it doesn't take long to get a taste for it. At one corner of the main plaza, a fajita cart wafts tempting scents my way; on the other side, under the rickety eaves of the Palace of the Governors, Native American artists from some of the state's 23 tribes are exhibiting shimmery micaceous clay pottery and handcrafted turquoise jewellery. Down at the market in the Railyard district, I pick up punnets of plump rainier cherries, chilli jam and bundles of dried sage, and after encouragement from the proprietor, John, buy a pair of vintage cowboy boots from the legendary Kowboyz shop. In the crisp heat of midday, I eat and shop and eat some more until it's time to hail a taxi to the city's newest—and weirdest—attraction.

Across town in a disused bowling alley donated by local arts patron and *Game of Thrones* creator George R. R. Martin, a renegade collective of artists called Meow Wolf has built an art experience that simulates the concept of the multiverse. I'm ushered into a full-size family home with one instruction: to riffle through the house to find clues as to what befell its inhabitants. It's not a mystery that's easily solved. The house, I discover, is riddled with wormholes. In the kitchen, I open the fridge and discover a white tunnel that twists into a 'frozen' lair. Lost somewhere else in the house's trippy hinterland, I gleefully bash out a tune on the xylophone rib cage of a dinosaur skeleton; and some hours later, I end up navigating a maze of aerial gangways and treehouses in a glowing, mutated garden. Whatever happened here is clearly out of this world. I wonder if House of Eternal Return could've been dreamed up anywhere other than New Mexico—a state renowned for alleged extraterrestrial sightings and the covert government ops of Roswell and Area 51, where nature itself often seems to flaunt the limits of possibility.

Each sunset here is a unique masterpiece, I find; a free light show that pulls new colours from the world like a magician drawing handkerchiefs from a hat. All one has to do is get in place. That evening, I head to the bell tower bar at the La Fonda on the Plaza, a century-old hotel that stands on the site of the city's very first inn. These days, it's decked out with a $2m/₹115.20 crore art collection. I wince my way through a super-strength margarita and watch the sky blush-pink then deep-red as the plump, tangerine orb of the sun drops behind the shadowy Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

I drive towards these peaks the next day, taking a slow, scenic route known as the High Road, en route to the Taos art colony. Were I to live in these parts, it's the sort of road trip I imagine I'd take just for the hell of it on lazy Sundays: the tarmac bends and soars through

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piñon pine forests and villages overlooking badlands pierced by rock spires.

Settlements along the High Road wear their Spanish heritage proudly, and none more so than Chimayó. Here, at Trujillo's Weaving Shop, I get chatting to the owner, Carlos. "My family has been in this business for eight generations; we trace our ancestry in the Chimayó Valley to settlers in the 1700s. Times are changing; I don't know if the next generation will want to weave, like I did," he tells me, pausing work at a large wooden loom. Geometric tapestries and rugs hang on the walls; many patterns date back to the first Spanish communities to settle here, often reflecting Navajo influences. "Some are very complicated," Carlos says, stroking one of his creations. "I try to make one a year, to preserve the style—to preserve the tradition."

Down the road is another Carlos: an artist, and grower of heirloom Chimayó chillies. His open studio, Medina's Gallery, is stuffed with Catholic tchotchkes, paintings and bags of ground chilli. He breaks open a pistachio nut and uses a half shell to scoop up a fiery powder for me to try. "You're tasting the past," he says, "Little has changed in the way this is made in centuries. We honour our roots." Across the road is the adobe chapel his grandfather built to Santo Niño de Atocha. It sits next door to the more famous Santuario de Chimayó, a church with a pit of 'healing dirt'—the focus of a vast pilgrimage each Holy Week. "Forty thousand people!," Carlos exclaims, throwing his hands up. But it's his family's little, less-visited chapel that truly captures my imagination. Shelves, pews and even the rafters are filled with children's shoes—petitions to this manifestation of Christ as a child, who's thought to be in constant need of new footwear because he tirelessly wanders the Earth looking for people to help. It's a haunting sight, looking like a ramshackle nursery with no wards.

For my last days in northern New Mexico, I'm staying in a vintage Airstream trailer in the barren sagebrush plains outside of Taos town centre. It's another taste of desert life: in the mornings, I drink stove-brewed coffee on my wooden deck, stoke the embers of my fire pit, and watch the sun spill over the spine of Taos Mountain.

The area is fascinating, a mecca for the stridently individual and left-field communities that seem to flourish in this desert. Just to the north-west, across the dramatic Rio Grande Gorge, lies a village of around 70 Earthships—gorgeous, Gaudí-esque eco-homes built from upcycled materials like glass bottles that flash like exotic insects in the midday sun.

To the east is Taos Pueblo, the only living Native American community designated as both a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a National Historic Landmark. The multistorey adobe structure at its heart, on the banks

Roasted chillies (left); Navajo rugs and tapestries at Santa Fe Farmers' Market (right).

JEN JUDGE

of Red Willow Creek, dates back a thousand years. Unlike in other parts of the country, the people of Taos Pueblo weren't forced onto reserves, and in 1970 they even won back 48,000 acres of their ancestral territory from the government.

Further north, on a remote hillside carpeted with ponderosa pine, is the region's last surviving hippy commune from the 1960s. "We don't really say 'commune' anymore; Lama Foundation is a conscious community," Kestrel Alexander, a resident of four years, advises me. "We're committed to inter-spirituality, as opposed to an ashram where there's one teacher, one philosophy. And there's no alcohol and no drugs here; I think that's why Lama survived so long and ultimately the others didn't."

I'm at the retreat to take part in a contact improvisation workshop, which turns out to be an hour of free movement involving leaning upon one another and entangling limbs in a slow, ecstatic dance. It's perhaps the least British thing I've ever done, and one of the most liberating. Later, we hike to a lookout point and watch misty rain showers roll across the plains. I ask Kestrel what draws people here. "I think they're looking for something that's missing," he replies quietly.

Everyone I meet waxes lyrical about this land—the way it gifts you back a part of yourself you thought was lost, or gives you space to worship or create. I'm struck by the spirited individualism of the people here, and the many ways of life kindled into being across the high desert. As many communities across the US become increasingly homogenous, it seems that New Mexicans insist on standing out.

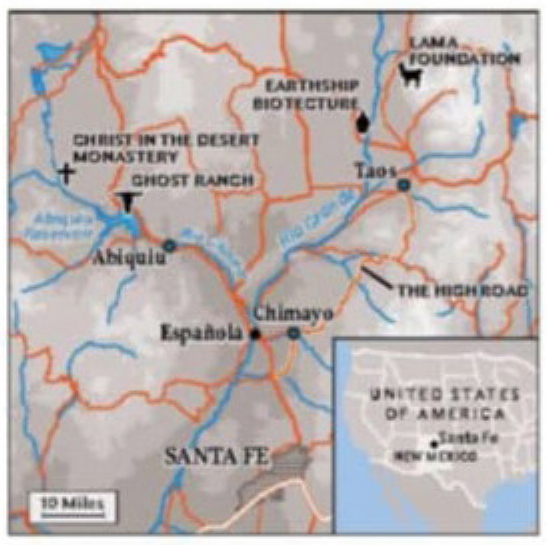
Rich Nichols, a local artist I'm introduced to, insists that it's here, around Taos, that the magic is at its strongest. "Back in Chicago, where I grew up, it was cold, it was industrial. Out here I get to use a whole other side of my palette. For artists, Taos is your mecca, your basilica, a sanctuary, all your chakras aligned, all your ley lines converged. I can't explain it; you have to try it to know it's real."

We're in his studio surrounded by a forest of easels that prop up his students' work: luminous, vibrant depictions of flowering deserts, the ancient adobe village of Taos Pueblo, and wild horses with billowing manes. "There's a saying in Taos: 'the mountain will either love you, caress you and hold you—or it'll spit you out'," he says.

Outside, the sun is setting; another fiery ode to the boldness of life in the high desert. I'm anxious to go and soak it up, to watch the landscape bloom and darken one last time before I head home. It seems to me that life's secrets might be written across New Mexico's canyons, if I only knew how to read them. Rich tilts his head to look at me and smiles broadly, as if gifted a vision. "I see it's embraced you." ▮

AMELIA DUGGAN. ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER

Essentials



GETTING THERE & AROUND Flights from Indian cities like Delhi and Mumbai to Santa Fe include at least two or more stops in gateway cities like New Jersey and Denver or London and Dallas.

WHEN TO GO

Average temperatures in New Mexico range from 6°C in Jan to 30°C in July. July-Aug often sees rain, so dirt roads can be challenging.

PLACES MENTIONED

Monastery of Christ in the Desert. *christdesert.org*
Ghost Ranch. *ghostranch.org*
Santa Fe Farmers' Market. *santafefarmersmarket.com*
Meow Wolf. *meowwolf.com*
Earthship Biotecture. *earthshipglobal.com*
Taos Pueblo. *taospueblo.com*
Lama Foundation. *lamafoundation.org*

WHERE TO STAY

- La Fonda on the Plaza, Santa Fe. *lafondasantafe.com*
- El Farolito, Santa Fe. *farolito.com*
- Casa Gallina, Taos. *casagallina.net*
- Hotel Luna Mystica, Taos. *hotellunamystica.com*
- The Blake, Taos Ski Valley. *skitaos.com*

MORE INFORMATION

- taos.org
- visitsantafe.com

HOW TO DO IT

HERITAGE INSPIRATIONS offers guided tours of northern New Mexico: cultural and artisan tours of Santa Fe, Chimayó, Taos and Taos Pueblo, excursions around Rio Grande Gorge and Ghost Ranch, and glamping retreats in the Chaco Canyon and Taos region. A four-day tour starts from *$1,200/₹91,255* per person (with a group minimum of two people), including transport and some meals but not flights. *heritageinspirations.com*

Unsung

South Africa

Venture past Cape Town, the Wine Route, and Kruger's famed Big Five, and you'll find a vast country little-visited Discover pioneering rewilding projects bringing new life to the interior and innovative entrepreneurs transforming the townships—this is the South Africa you don't know, but one that's slowly beginning to reveal itself

BY **AMELIA DUGGAN & HEATHER RICHARDSON**

The alternative safari

The Green Kalahari

The little-visited Northern Cape claims a uniquely verdant swathe of the Kalahari. Welcome to South Africa's largest private game reserve, Tswalu Kalahari, home to thrilling chases and pioneering conservation efforts

"The wild dogs are on the move!" Our guide Kosie puts down the radio and hurries towards the den where we find five three-week-old pups abandoned. The alpha female, their mother, had tried to tuck them safely away several times, but the tiny youngsters just wouldn't stay put. Eventually, the inexperienced mother gave up and left them. Crossing our fingers for the puppies, we set off again to find her and her pack doing what wild dogs do best: hunting.

This is the green Kalahari, a 5,79,365-square-kilometre desert that sprawls across Botswana and Namibia. The southern section spills into South Africa's Northern Cape, a semi-arid region that receives just enough rain to avoid being classified a desert. Instead it goes by the local name of the 'green Kalahari'. It's home to the largest private game reserve in the country: Tswalu Kalahari, my 708-square-kilometre base for the trip. It's a long way from anywhere, but that's why it's so special.

It's evening and everything is golden. The rust-orange sand flashes past the windows of our car, the sinking sun burnishing the pale, bleached grass. We find the dogs trotting through the savannah, bushy white tails wagging. Among them is the new mother, lactating as she runs; it seems she's forgotten her pups for now. The leading dog spots a warthog and sprints after it, the others in hot pursuit. In most safari destinations, when wild dogs vanish into the bush, vehicles don't stand a chance of following. But here, the open plains allow us to hurtle alongside the animals—a hair-raising, wildlife documentary-style perspective.

The warthog eludes the dogs by backing down an aardvark burrow, its sharp tusks preventing the hungry canines from following. Then the dogs are off again, a young wildebeest in their sights. Kosie swerves around deep burrows and hardy shrubs, careful to keep a safe distance from the pack. The wildebeest calf manages to leg it back into the protection of its herd. The adults turn to stare down the pursuers, who pause, unsure, before deciding against a confrontation and moving on.

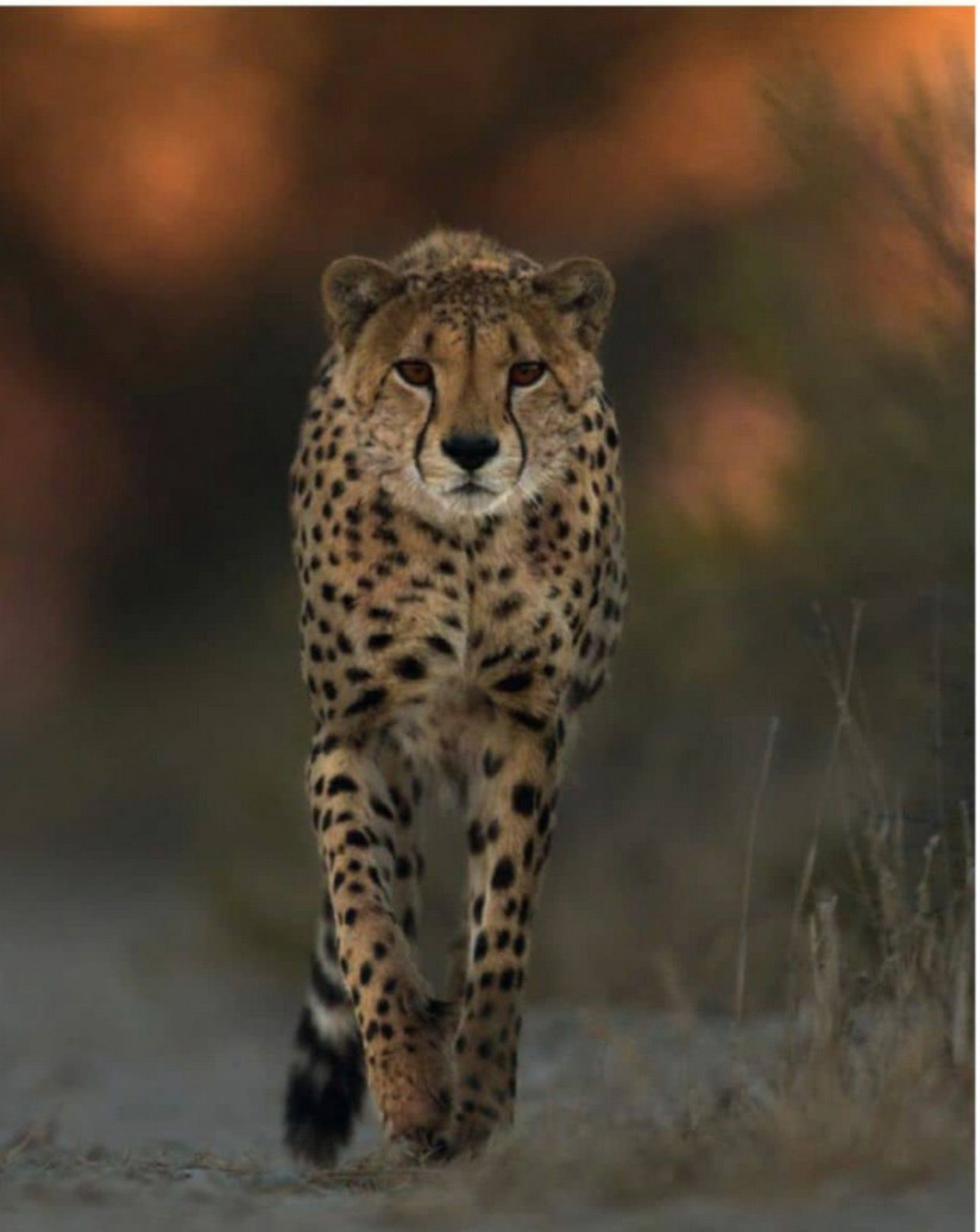
Finally, as the sun sets and the sky turns a dusky pink, we lose the dogs; they disappear over a sand dune hanging off the back of a doomed red hartebeest. But we're elated—some of us possibly more so having avoided seeing the hartebeest's gory end.

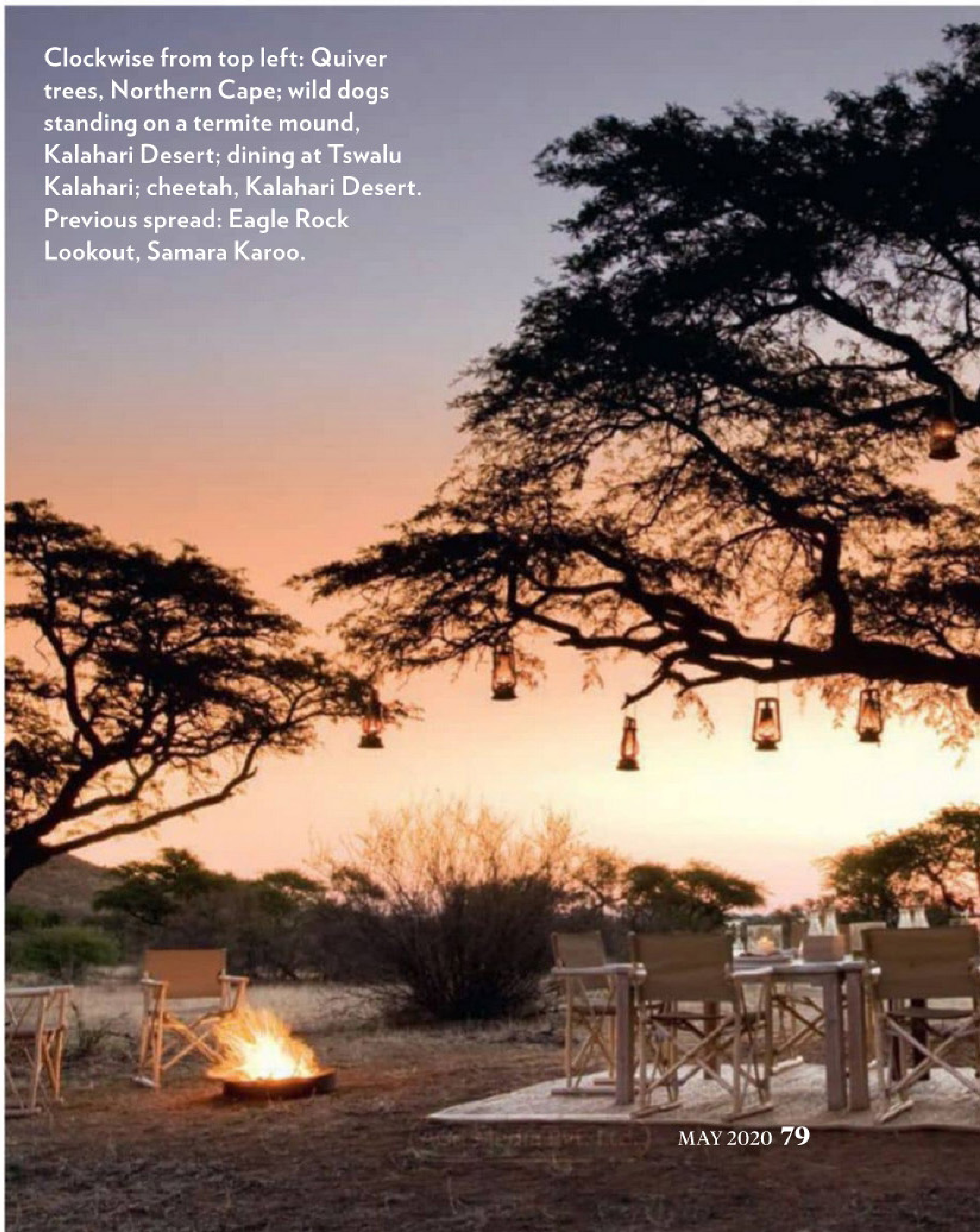
Zooming around the bush is thrilling enough, but Tswalu Kalahari isn't just a place where you hunt with wild dogs. During my stay I find a pride of powerful, black-maned Kalahari lions—a rich reward to a chilly winter's morning spent tracking. I also sit with the meerkats, the region's rock stars, in one of two habituated colonies; spot the extraordinarily rare pangolin; and admire the athletic elegance of a cheetah. But Tswalu Kalahari is so much more than just a luxury safari reserve—it's also an area of impression conservation credentials.

South African billionaire philanthropist Nicky Oppenheimer took over a hunting concession in 1998 to create the reserve. His aim was to restore the southern Kalahari; the name 'Tswalu' means 'a new beginning' in Tswana. Also passionate about scientific discovery, the Oppenheimers invite researchers to track the impact of climate change on aardvarks and ground pangolins, and to study the reserve's impressive 75 species of butterflies. In 2008, the Tswalu Foundation was set up by Nicky's son, Jonathan, to fund such conservation projects. It also runs a local school and clinic, along with the Tracker Academy, a programme for Khomani San (bushmen), and other Northern Cape communities, to train as trackers and ambassadors for wildlife conservation.

The southern Kalahari provides a different experience to so many reserves and parks in South Africa where the Big Five practically throw themselves at you. You have to work for it here, spending time tracking the animals through the wilderness. It's a slow style of safari that encourages visitors to understand this fascinating ecosystem and the challenges of conservation. And when, or if, you do get those exhilarating wildlife experiences—like a heart-pumping wild dog hunt—it's infinitely more rewarding. *tswalu.com* **HR**

GETTY





Clockwise from top left: Quiver trees, Northern Cape; wild dogs standing on a termite mound, Kalahari Desert; dining at Tswalu Kalahari; cheetah, Kalahari Desert. Previous spread: Eagle Rock Lookout, Samara Karoo.

The outback experience

Into the Karoo

Thanks to rewilding, this great inland desert is once again roamed by lions, but follow the Karoo's gravel roads to find a scattering of atmospheric Dutch settler towns where culture and frontier country colourfully converge

It's clear the two young lions are itching to leave. Over the past few weeks, they've started pacing the boundary of the *boma* (enclosure), with no food for four days. So, when the gate is opened and the carcass of an antelope—gemsbok—is left temptingly outside, we're ready, cameras poised.

And we wait. Our earlier anticipation now flat, we drive to the *boma* to investigate. True to form, the lions are sound asleep under their favourite bush. As we're finishing dinner 14 hours later, we hear they've finally moved. We race back to the *boma* and there they are, gorging on the gemsbok: the first free-roaming lions in this part of the Great Karoo for 180 years.

A vast, semi-arid region that covers around 40 per cent of South Africa, the Karoo is little known outside the country. Divided into the Great and the southern Little Karoo, thriving herds of elephant, hippo, rhino and the now-extinct Cape lion once roamed these plains. But colonists' rampant hunting eradicated most of the wildlife and farmland fences put an end to the little-understood springbok migration.

To restore what was lost, Samara Karoo is a 70,000-acre private reserve, an eight-hour drive east of Cape Town. With the lions' reintroduction, Samara is now the Great Karoo's only Big Five conservancy, part of a rewilding project by South African-British owners, the Tompkins family.

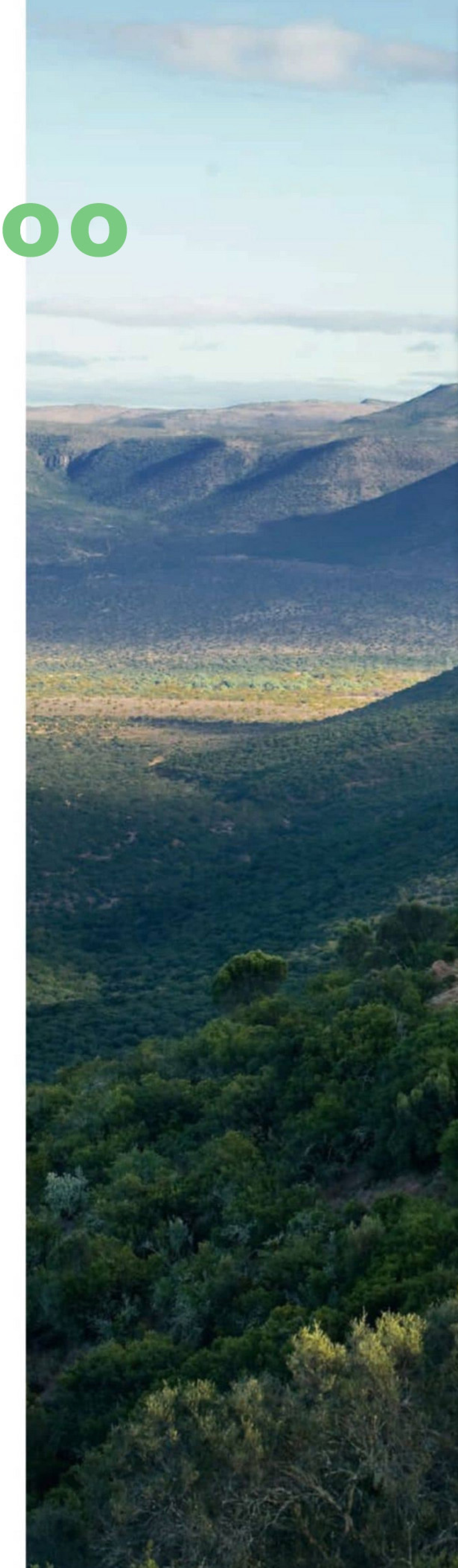
On foot, we spend time with a cheetah called Chilli and her five fluffy cubs, and a curious white rhino, who wanders over to get a better look at us. There are flocks of blue cranes, herds of wildebeest, white-faced blesbok, springbok and Cape mountain zebras. Elephants—reintroduced in 2017—roam the forested lower slopes of the mountain.

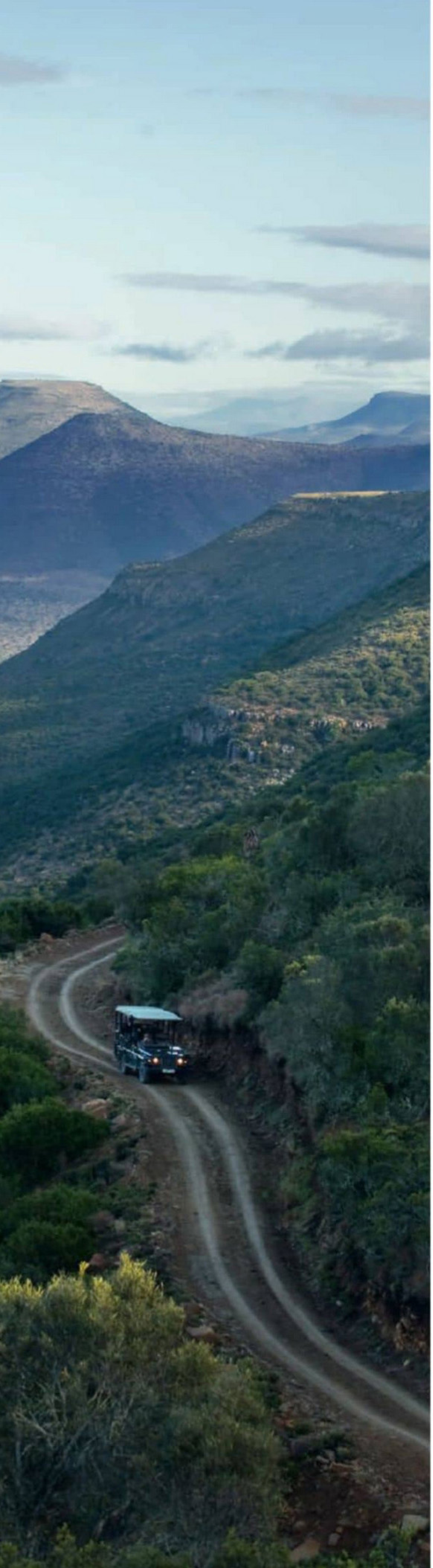
It's wild safari territory but the Karoo's arid expanses aren't just Big Five terrain. Driving west, I arrive in Prince Albert at the foot of the Swartberg Mountains. With one central street of Cape Dutch buildings, fringed by eucalyptus trees, the tiny town has become a cultural hub. There are cooking schools, yoga centres, the eclectic Fransie Pienaar Museum, and galleries.

My guesthouse, Prince Albert Country Stay, is attached to an antique store. Two floor-to-ceiling bookshelves line my bedroom walls, with the antique bed frame and artworks available to purchase.

From there, I drive over the Swartberg Pass. A feat of late 19th-century engineering, this series of narrow, blind switchbacks is a dramatic drive. On the other side, I emerge into the Little Karoo, a much greener land. I turn onto a dirt road lined by little farms, coating my car in a thick layer of peachy dust, and eventually join scenic Route 62 that leads to Cape Town via rolling hills of vines. En route, I stop at Ronnie's Sex Shop. Originally a fruit and veg store, the bar was renamed as a prank, Ronnie embraced his new identity, hanging donated bras from the ceiling.

There's something captivating about the Karoo—the space, isolation and starkness. Speaking to people along the way, I find a sense of escapism, too. Many move here for a fresh start, to pursue dreams or forget broken ones. From serious rewilding projects to bonkers back-country bars, it's a place of possibility. *samara.co.za; princealbertcountrystay.com* **HR**





The wild weekend break

West Coast National Park & Paternoster

Forget the Garden Route. Do as the Capetonians do and explore Paternoster and the West Coast National Park

Where

A 90-minute drive from Cape Town, the West Coast is a local favourite for a restorative weekend away.

What to do

Hike or bike trails through *fynbos* (shrubby heathland), or visit the icy waters of Langebaan Lagoon for kayaking and sailing. West Coast National Park is great for spring wildflowers (go between August and September when the blooms are at their peak) while southern right whales cruise the coast (August-November). In Paternoster, a sleepy fishing village, it's all about unwinding with good food, good wine and reviving beach walks.

Where to eat

Wolfgat is one of South Africa's best restaurants where chef Kobus van der Merwe's menus celebrate ingredients foraged in Paternoster's *Strandveld* (beach vegetation). Start with a flute of MCC fizz, then savour *tjokka* (calamari) with wild garlic marsala and *slangbessies* (wild berry); West Coast oysters with kelp and dune celery; Strandveld lamb with succulent *brakvygie* leaves and nectarines with smoking wild sage. Garth Almazan's new Leeto also serves a West Coast-inspired menu, while Noisy Oyster and Voorstrandt are two other popular dining spots. *wolfgat.co.za*

Where to stay

West Coast National Park's dark skies allow for excellent stargazing from the six-bedroom Abrahamskraal Cottage. In Paternoster, fishing cottages double as boutique guesthouses. Sugar Shack is minutes from the beach while the four-room Oystercatchers' Haven overlooks the shore just outside town. Central Abalone Hotel & Spa houses eclectic art and decor; next door, Gilcrest Place offers three comfortable, marine-influenced suites, two with sea views. *sanparks.org; sugarshackcollection.com; oystercatchershaven.com; abalonehouse.co.za; gilcrestplace.com* **HR**

Samara Karoo drive (left); Fish dish at Wolfgat (right), Paternoster.

BOOK NOW CHOP CHOP
EVERYBODY WAS A KUNG FU FIGHTING
NI HAO NEW YEAR
HARO HARO 2010
A NIGHT OF CHAMPAGNE and
Yum Cha Cha
AT BBB
PARTY KARATE on the DANCE FLOOR

The city break

Durban: The New Urban Cool

A host of new openings in Durban, considered by some as South Africa's gateway city, offer plenty of reason to stick around

South Africa's under-sung beachfront city is finally having its moment in the sun; although, with some 320 days of blue skies a year, it's arguably had a fair few of those already. Travellers can plant a parasol on the Golden Mile and discover the up-and-coming charms of this port city. In just a few years, Durban's shabby Station Drive Precinct has blossomed with offbeat boutique shops; a flurry of new openings has reinvigorated its Florida Road high street; and a multi-million-pound regeneration is breathing new life into the dilapidated Point Waterfront. Durban's always been hot; now it's finding its cool.

The lunch spot

Falafel Fundi

For Middle Eastern soul food with a Durban fusion twist, order a pillowy Indian roti wrap with crunchy, colourful salads and homemade falafel in Saar Ben Hamoo's cafe. The charismatic chef gained a devoted following with his market stall, and put down permanent roots on the Florida Road, thanking his family's falafel recipe for his success.

The tour

Beset Durban

Four friends, one mission: to get Durbanites to fall in love with their own city. The gang organises a free monthly tour of an overlooked part of Durban, using local experts and their unique brand of pizzazz to bring local history to life. Sign up to the mailing list to learn more. Fitness fanatics can also joint the Beset team on their five kilometre runs along the promenade each Monday at 5.30 a.m. *besetdurban.com*

The hidden gem

The Chairman

A diamond in the rough, this fancy jazz bar stands amid ruins on the most rundown block of the Point neighbourhood. Owner Ndabo Langa has cultivated the moody vibe of a speakeasy: plush armchairs, eclectic light fittings, taxidermy, and come weekends, the best live bands and DJs around. *thechairmanlive.com*

The 'hood

Station Drive

Homegrown creatives have transformed this once-crummy warehouse district into a hive of hipster enterprise. There's lots to discover in this part of town, but a special mention goes to bar-cum-microbrewery Station 43, and Momenti Gelato, whose 'lab' sells ice cream flavours made with local ingredients like Golden Turmeric Coconut. Visit on the first Thursday of the month, when galleries, shops and bars stay open late and throng with people looking for a good time, or for the weekly Morning Trade market on Sundays in The Plant. *station43.co.za* **AD**

Clockwise from top left: Platter, Station 43, Durban; dusk on the beach; surfing; Bean Bag Bohemia, Durban; Durban beach

PETE GODING, AWL IMAGES, PICFAIR, GETTY

saloon
BAZOOKA

**Orlando Towers,
Soweto, Johannesburg**

A Tour of the Township

It's impossible to understand Johannesburg—its chequered history and the dynamism of the present day—without visiting Soweto township

Travellers are surprised by what they see," says my charismatic guide, Charles Ncube. "Yes, life in Soweto can be tough. We have three classes: low, very low, and very, very low," he jokes. "But it's a proud, positive place. Everyone is building a better future. The footballers and celebrities who make it big, now they stay. It's the place to be!"

The sprawling, low-rise township on the city's southwestern periphery is home to a staggering 1.3 million people. Under Apartheid, Soweto was an address synonymous with forced habitation and deprivation, but today it's a very different picture: this township is a driver of Johannesburg's diversity and dynamism.

A different perspective

It's perfectly safe to walk unguided around the main tourist sights, so set out on foot. "Some locals find tour buses offensive. Get out and explore! We're not going to bite. This isn't safari," Charles says. His top tip: sign up for a tour offered by a local business. Lebo's Backpackers offers neighbourhood tours by bike or bright yellow tuk tuk. But the best township view is only for the brave: in 2008, a 328-feet-high suspension bridge was strung between Orlando Towers for bungee jumpers. There's rock climbing and the world's highest SCAD freefall inside the disused power plant, too. *sowetobackpackers.com; sowetooutdooradventures.co.za; sowetotowers.co.za*

GETTY

Welcome to Vilakazi Street

Orlando West's lively artery is the only street in the world to have had two Nobel Peace Prize winners as residents. Mandela House museum, the home of South Africa's first black president from 1947 until just after his release from Robben Island in 1990, is must-see: full of memorabilia, it shines a light on Madiba's early family life. Archbishop Desmond Tutu's former home, a block away, is marked by a plaque. Vilakazi is full of restaurants, costumed dancers, and stalls selling Mandela merchandise and clothes in bright *shweshwe* fabrics. But for the best of Soweto fashion, check out the Box Shop, which showcases up-and-coming local designers. Nearby, at the intersection with Moema Street, the Hector Pieterson Memorial and Museum commemorates the tragic events of the Soweto uprising. Hector, a 12-year-old schoolboy, was among the first shot dead on June 16, 1976 when police opened fire on a student march. "It put Soweto on the map," Charles explains. To hear stories of Soweto under apartheid, gather round the campfire in Lebo's Backpackers on the last Thursday of every month when locals share memories with travellers. *mandelahouse.com; theboxshop.co.za; sowetobackpackers.com*

Eating local

Sakhumzi Restaurant on Vilakazi Street began life as a *shebeen* (illegal bar) and was formalised into a restaurant in 2001. Its menu offers a solid introduction to township dishes, including grilled lamb, *mogodu* (tripe), the pap corn dish of *umqa*, and pot stews. The quintessential township eating experience is, however, a *shisa nyama*—an open-fire barbecue. At Chaf Pozi, at the foot of the Orlando Towers, diners choose their cuts of meat then watch them sizzle on the grill while enjoying DJs and live township music. To drink, try South Africa's first township beer, Soweto Gold—then later, tour the microbrewery that makes it, set just off Vilakazi Street. There are plenty of informal places to eat, too. Look out for hole-in-the-wall shops selling deep-fried 'fat cakes' and the homemade township 'beer' *umqombothi*, an earthy, sour brew. Charles explains: "We drink it after a long day, at traditional events, or when we're communing with the ancestors. And Soweto is the best place in Johannesburg to find it." *sakhumzi.co.za; chafpozi.co.za; sowetobrewing.co.za*

The sound of Soweto

One of the best venues for live music in Johannesburg is Pata Pata, in the trendy Maboneng neighbourhood, which draws on the concept of township shebeens to showcase local drummers, performers and singers in a low-lit, informal restaurant setting. The venue takes its name from a song by the singer and anti-apartheid activist Miriam Makeba, who began her career in Johannesburg's township shebeens. Another of her songs, Soweto Blues, released in 1977, is an important cultural text, written in the aftermath of the student uprising. *286 Fox Street. T: 00 27 73 036 9031.* **AD**

Cape Agulhas, Garden Route

Best of the beaches

Surf & Sand

South Africa has over 2,575 kilometres of coast, from its border with Namibia in the west to its Indian Ocean border with Mozambique in the east. We pick out the best beaches en route

End of the trail

Nature's Valley, Western Cape

This resort and village is a Garden Route favourite, overlooking the clear blue Indian Ocean, with the postcard-perfect Groot River Lagoon and Tsitsikamma foothills at its rear. It's also the terminus of the five-day Otter Trail, which starts at Storms River Mouth and winds for 43 kilometres through gallery forest, *fynbos* and wildflower meadows. When completed, it's customary for hikers to tie a walking boot to a branch of a village tree. **AD**

GETTY

ALAMY

Paddle with penguins

Boulders Beach, Cape Town

See endangered African penguins at their colony in Simon's Town. The three pristine beaches are sheltered from wind and waves by the eponymous boulders, so it's great for kids. Penguins glide around in the shallows—just watch out for their razor-sharp beaks.

River meets ocean

Kenton-on-Sea, Eastern Cape

Set between the mouths of the Bushmans and Kariega Rivers, this Sunshine Coast town is home to a reserve that attracts copious bird species. In summer, the rivers are a veritable playground, with water skiing, fishing, kite surfing and horse-riding all on offer. Kariega Beach and Middle Beach are wild and undeveloped, with rock formations and pools at low tide. Wilder and more remote, Shelley Beach is a short hike across the dunes.

Under milkwood

Mdumbi Beach, Eastern Cape

About 11 kilometres from the Wild Coast's beloved Coffee Bay, little-known Mdumbi is a hidden Transkei region treasure. It's an unspoilt spot, protected by milkwood trees and often empty but for the odd bobbing surfer. Living in mudbrick houses around Mdumbi are the Pondo people, who offer fishing and *braai* (barbecue) trips on the Mdumbi River, as well as village tours.

Escape the crowds

Llandudno Beach, Cape Town

Like nearby Clifton 4th Beach, Llandudno has Blue Flag status but attracts a fraction of the crowds (it's fiddly to find with scant parking). Persevere—its striking boulders, powdery sand and lush backdrop make it ideal for secluded sunbathing. Follow the footpath beneath the Twelve Apostles to the sheltered Sandy Bay—Cape Town's only (albeit unofficial) nudist beach.

Swim with the fishes

Sodwana Bay, KwaZulu-Natal

South Africa's finest scuba diving site lies within the iSimangaliso Wetland Park on the Elephant Coast, a shoreline stretching from the Mozambique border in the north to St Lucia village in the south. The reefs just offshore are home to around 1,200 fish species (the Great Barrier Reef has approximately 1,800), with turtles, whales and sharks all seasonal visitors.

Surfing (U)SA

Jeffreys Bay, Eastern Cape

An hour's drive west of Port Elizabeth, the town of Jeffreys Bay is one of the world's premier surf spots. The 6 foot barrels rolling in on Supertubes Beach can be fierce and the locals territorial, so beginners prefer gentler Dolphin Beach. The bay's après-surf bars and hippy handicraft shops are a draw, too.

Retro seaside getaway

Golden Mile, Durban

Durban has one of the world's finest urban beaches, backed by seaside attractions including quaint Mini Town, a model village full of city landmarks, and Fun World, a faded amusement park with spinning rides and an original aerial cableway from the 1970s. Adding some glamour at the northern end of the strip is art deco Suncoast Casino, which underwent a facelift last year, and is illuminated by neon at night.

Whale of a time

Grotto Beach,Western Cape

Wide, tranquil and running unbroken for 18 kilometres along the Atlantic coast, this is a stellar whale watching spot. It's common to see humpbacks and southern right whales breaching and spouting near the shore from the comfort of a beach towel, especially between July and December. From Grotto Beach, head into Hermanus for a cruise to see these creatures up close, or head out on a three-hour coastal hike to De Kelders.

Diamonds aren't forever

Port Nolloth, Northern Cape

For many years, the cliffs around Port Nolloth yielded diamonds; today, the sleepy town gets its money from rock lobster fishing, and there are some characterful mariners to be met in the local pubs. Over a spit lies McDougall's Bay, a rugged beach with frigid Atlantic waters that's popular with windsurfers. December is a good time to visit: the water is at its warmest and, on the last day of the year, the old-timey Sand Festival takes place, kicking off with a beauty competition and ending with fireworks. **AD**

Clockwise from left: Cleaning surfboards on Durban's Golden Mile; Grotto Beach, Hermanus; Sodwana Bay

Meet the locals

The Spinach King

'Spinach King' Lufefe Nomjana runs two eponymous health food cafes/bakeries in Cape Town, serving spinach-based snacks and drinks

What's the concept behind Spinach King?

Growing up, I didn't understand that what you eat affects your health. I came from a place where you just ate to feel full. That lack of knowledge was widespread, with people often too busy working to cook and bake for themselves. At Spinach King, we offer healthy substitutes to fast food. If you're educated about your diet and take care of yourself, you'll take care of other people.

What inspired you to start the business?

It germinated from the dust of Khayelitsha [a Cape Town township]. In 2011, I volunteered in a community garden and fell in love with spinach. I was astonished you could plant it and have something to eat three to four weeks later. I did some research and found that one leaf contains 13 phytochemicals that boost health and prevent cardiovascular and chronic illnesses. I volunteered with a hospital dietician to learn more. I saw people with diabetes, high blood pressure and hypertension, and so I decided to make low-GI bread using spinach.

What's on the menu?

We created a first-of-its-kind, gluten-free spinach bread, using fresh organic spinach, tapioca flour, rosemary and basil. We make toasted sandwiches and vegan rolls, and smoothies at our organic juice bar. We now have a franchise in Amsterdam!

How is the township changing?

Before the bakery, people weren't conscious about their health; the area was high in carcinogens because people were dumping things. But today, you see a more developed Khayelitsha; people are even jogging. Now it's a foodie destination where you can find anything for your appetite. *spinachking.co.za* **AD**

GETTY, SOUTH AFRICA TOURISM

ACK Media Pvt. Ltd.

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Tour guide Siseko

PETE GODING

The coastal escape

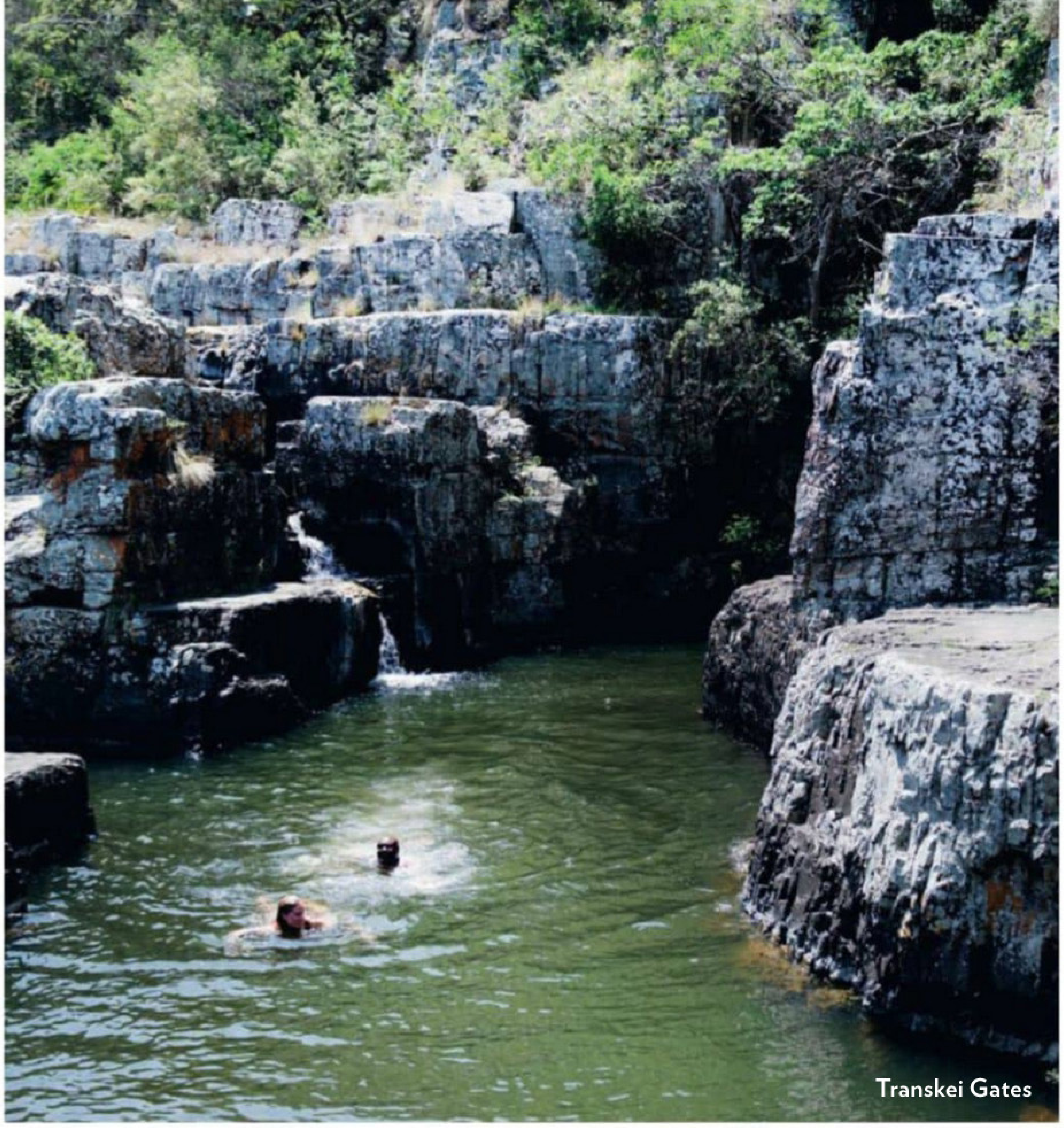
The Really Wild Coast

Stretching from East London in the Eastern Cape to the border of KwaZulu-Natal, the Wild Coast earns its name with deserted Indian Ocean beaches, pristine waterfalls and a age-old Xhosa communities, many of which still share a close bond with the land

I've reached the edge of the Earth. It's night when I finally make it to my guesthouse in Morgan Bay, and a primordial darkness has swallowed the landscape. The only electric lights to be seen glow dimly from inside the verandah, allowing the cosmos to shine brilliantly in a moonless sky. It's so dark that the rugged coastline, where so many sailors have run aground, could be a fiction, except there's salt on the breeze and from the blackness below the lip of the driveway comes the rhythmic hiss and suck of waves—a tidal chorus that hums softly in my bedroom. The Wild Coast, I decide as I drift off, is certainly wild.

Siseko, a homegrown guide for the Eastern Cape, meets me after breakfast and we set off in his van. In daylight, I can see the towering headlands and empty beaches that earned this part of the world its reputation for off-grid adventures. "Don't you think it's magical?" he asks as we drive. "There are waterfalls that pour into the ocean; kilometres of beaches—private for you, except for maybe a few cows. You might meet a Xhosa fellow and end up in a village pub sharing a beer. The people here are welcoming. In Xhosa culture, we say '*indwendwe ziyabukwa*'—it's a principal we hold about hospitality, about giving others the best you can offer."

We follow the road to the Kei River, driving the van onto a rickety cable ferry chugging across to enter the former Transkei region, where, some kilometres away in the mudbrick village of Mvezo, Nelson Mandela was born. We park up at Trennerys Hotel



Transkei Gates

and borrow some whittled sticks to tackle a nature hike called Trevor's Trail. It starts with a boat ride. We head up the sparkling estuary aboard a fishing skiff, navigating islands of towering borassus palms. Siseko is in his element, naming the birds flitting through the reeds, spotting the twig nests of fish eagles, and ticking off on his fingers the healing properties of different plants. The boat deposits us on the edge of a forest and we hike through it, stripping off our boots when we reach a ford and wading in to cool off and skim stones. Siseko tells me that the Xhosa people ask ancestral spirits for safe passage when crossing rivers, and to this effect, he offers up a prayer, the melodious clicks of the Xhosa language mirroring the bubbling of the stream.

Our path peters out at a marshy bank, where a ferryman is snoozing in the midday heat. Drowsily, he steers us to the area's headline geological feature. We bob down a narrow channel between two ancient cliffs, their twin walls smooth and sheer, almost as if a sword had cleaved them apart: the Transkei Gates. We clamber out at the far end where the cliffs open up into a basin. Flowering shrubs and orchids sprout from recesses in the rocks, and a thin waterfall is feeding a dark pool. In the meanwhile, Siseko is already climbing up to a ledge, preparing to jump in. He's pretty high up, perhaps 16 feet, when, fully dressed, he bombs into the water. "It really is safe!" he yells, kicking over to a rusted ladder and climbing out. I pick my own ledge—not quite as high as his—and pitch myself into the pool with a scream.

On the drive back to Morgan Bay, I remain glued to the window. I watch as the rugged coastline whizzes by, and spot the distant clouds of white balloon over the ocean. It's a pod of whales careening upwards, one after the other, twisting their flippers and their vast underbellies in mid-air before crashing headlong into the water. I'm stunned, which makes Siseko chuckle. Humpbacks are a regular sight here during the annual sardine run. He's right: this place is magical. *uncuthutours.co.za; mitfordhotel.co.za; trennerys.co.za/trevors-trails* **AD**

Essentials

GETTING THERE

Flights from Indian cities like Delhi and Bengaluru to Johannesburg include at least two layovers, while flights from Mumbai usually include one layover. Flights from Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru to Cape Town include at least one or more layovers in African gateway cities.

GETTING AROUND

Budget airlines Safair and Mango, and coach companies Greyhound and Intercape offer reliable transportation between urban hubs. But the easiest way to get around, and off the beaten track, is by car. South Africans drive on the left, the road network is well-maintained, and the country is set up for road trips: approach the Green Kalahari from Johannesburg (8 hr/780 km); explore the Karoo from Cape Town (5 hr/458 km), or the Wild Coast from either Durban (2 hr/168 km) or East London (7 hr/507 km). Shop around local and international agencies like Avis to get the best deal.

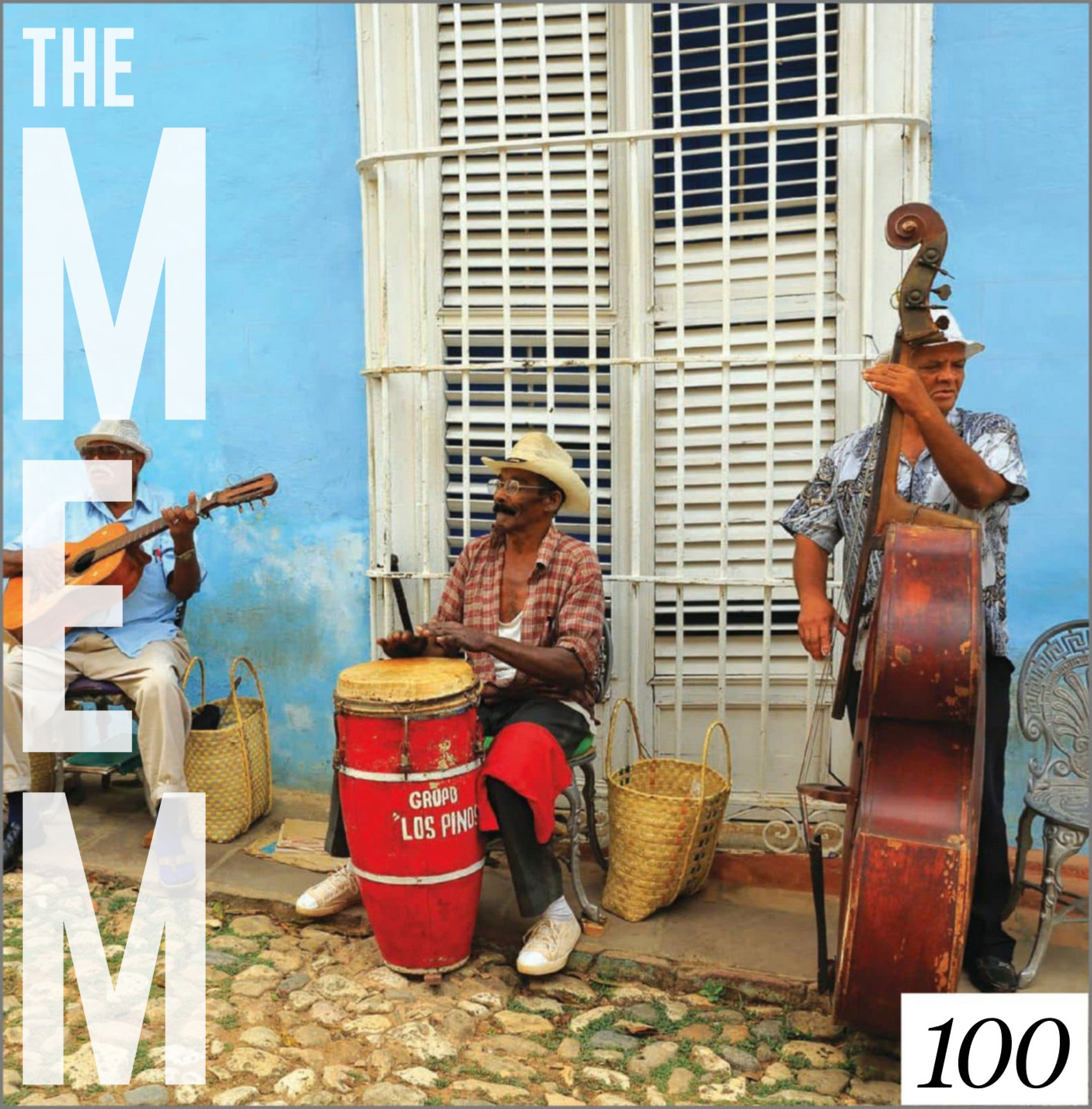
In cities, Uber is safer than public transport or minibus taxis. *flymango.com; flysafair.co.za; greyhound.co.za; avis.co.in; intercape.co.za; uber.com*

WHEN TO GO

Peak season for Cape Town and the Western Cape is the warm, windless summer (highs of 29°C between December and February). Summers in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng can easily surpass 30°C with some rainfall, but have mild winters, making the Wild Coast, Durban and Johannesburg pleasant year-round. The Karoo and Northern Cape have extreme temperatures (40°C in the summer, and winter nights can hover around freezing), so are best experienced between April-May and September-October.

PETE GODING

THE MEMOIR


GRUPO
LOS PINOS

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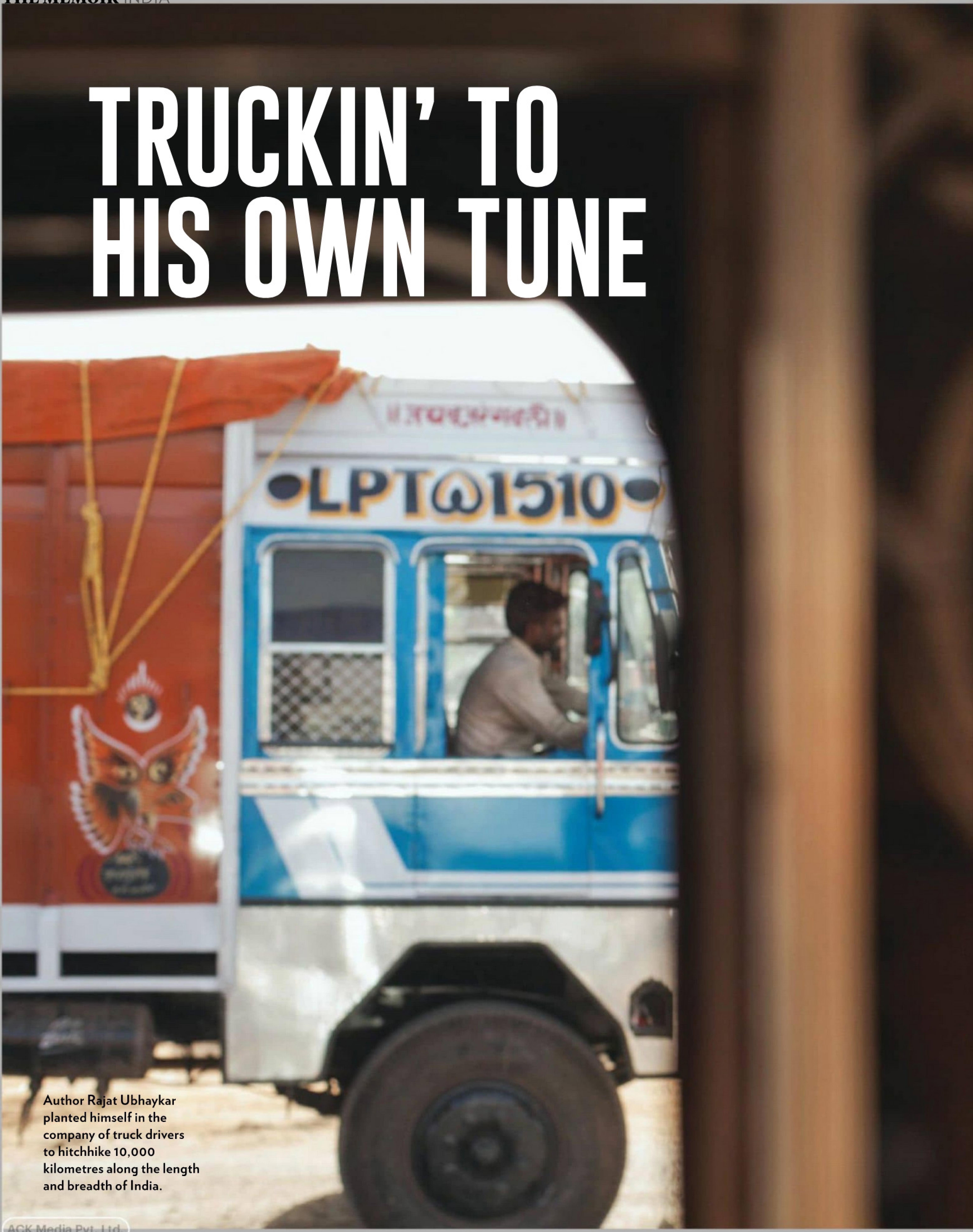
SUAT ERACAR/SHUTTERSTOCK

92 AN AUTHOR HITCHHIKES WITH INDIA'S TRUCKERS
100 OFF COURSE IN CUBA

TRUCKIN' TO HIS OWN TUNE



Author Rajat Ubhaykar planted himself in the company of truck drivers to hitchhike 10,000 kilometres along the length and breadth of India.

From savouring Kashmir's scenery and goshtaba to meeting gun-wielding Naga women, author Rajat Ubhaykar hitchhiked on India's kingly trucks and wrote a book about it

BY HUMAIRA ANSARI

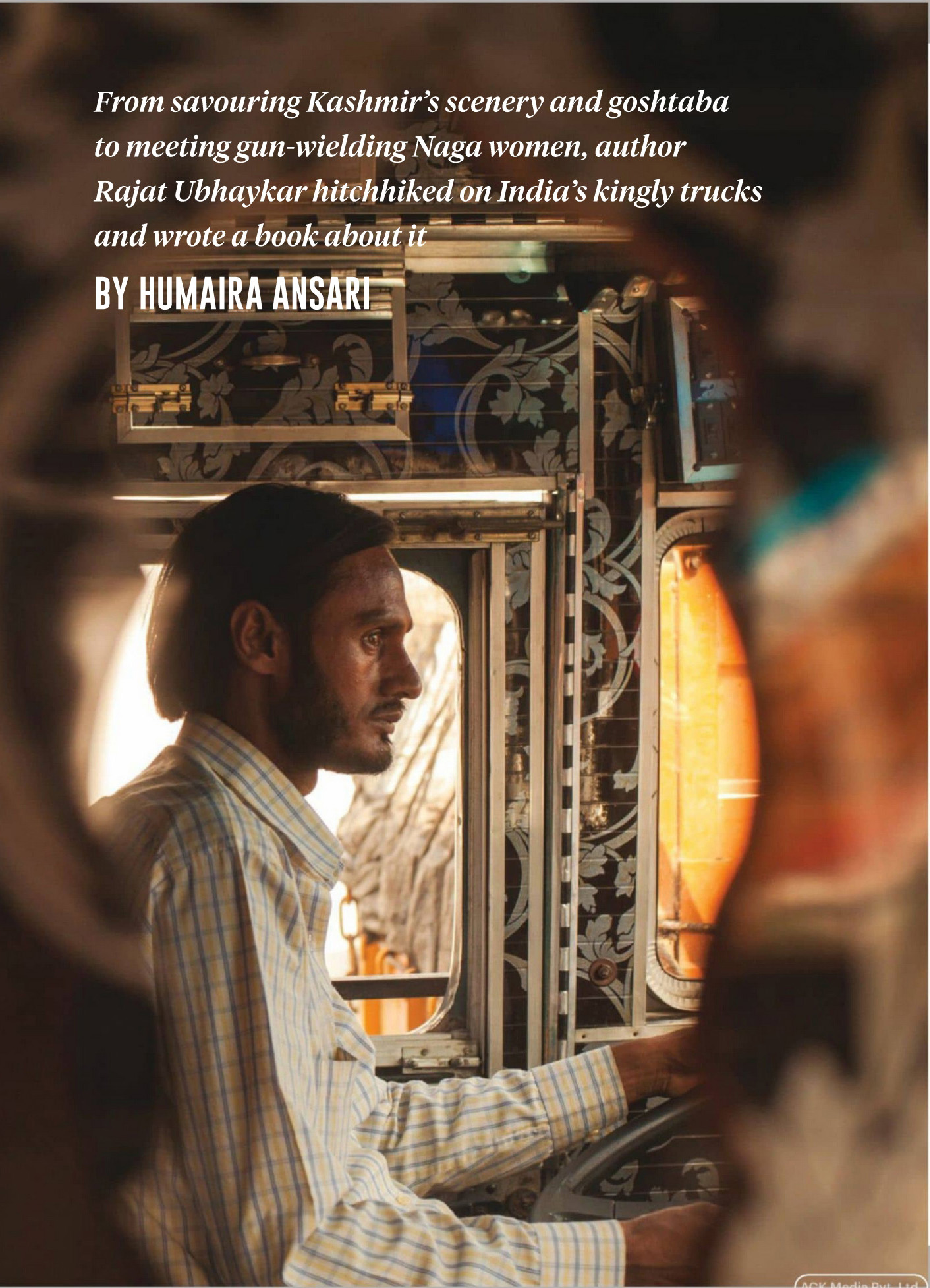


PHOTO COURTESY: RAJAT UBHAYAKAR

IF A BOOK WERE TO BE JUDGED BY ITS COVER, RAJAT UBHAYKAR'S *TRUCK DE INDIA!: A HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO HINDUSTAN* WOULD FARE JUST FINE. BRIGHT RED, TINGES OF TEAL, GREEN AND GOLD, THE ARTWORK STARS THE FRONT OF A TRUCK IN ALL ITS FINERY, BEJEWELLED LIKE A BRIDE.

A predictable "Horn Ok Please" headlines the back, and the text is just as rich and colourful. That's because to bring out this book the young journalist hitchhiked 10,000 kilometres, all of them unplanned, along India's highways. Ubhaykar planted himself in the company of truck drivers and their abiding khalasis (apprentices), experiencing India from a vantage point that's both unusual and exclusive—the mysterious cabins of countless dazzling trucks.

Navigating the insurgency-ridden NH39 or saving space for *bhatkal* biryani and spiced clams along South India's stunning coastline, the author recounts the India he saw—and felt.

What does India look like from the windshield of a blingy truck?

Trucks are, like I have written in my book, the kings of the road. They have a beastly presence and offer the most commanding views of the Indian highways and the Indian countryside. In Andhra Pradesh, for instance, when I was travelling from the coastal strip of Nellore inwards to Chittoor, I witnessed one of the most picturesque sunsets, contained perfectly within the windshield. That sight can't be experienced from the window of a sedan or even a bus—at least not at the same scale.

Facing page: While *Truck De India!* covers some stunning stretches of the journey (top), here the author delves into his memory to discuss the unpenned scenic beauty of the leg from Pathankot to Dharamshala (bottom).

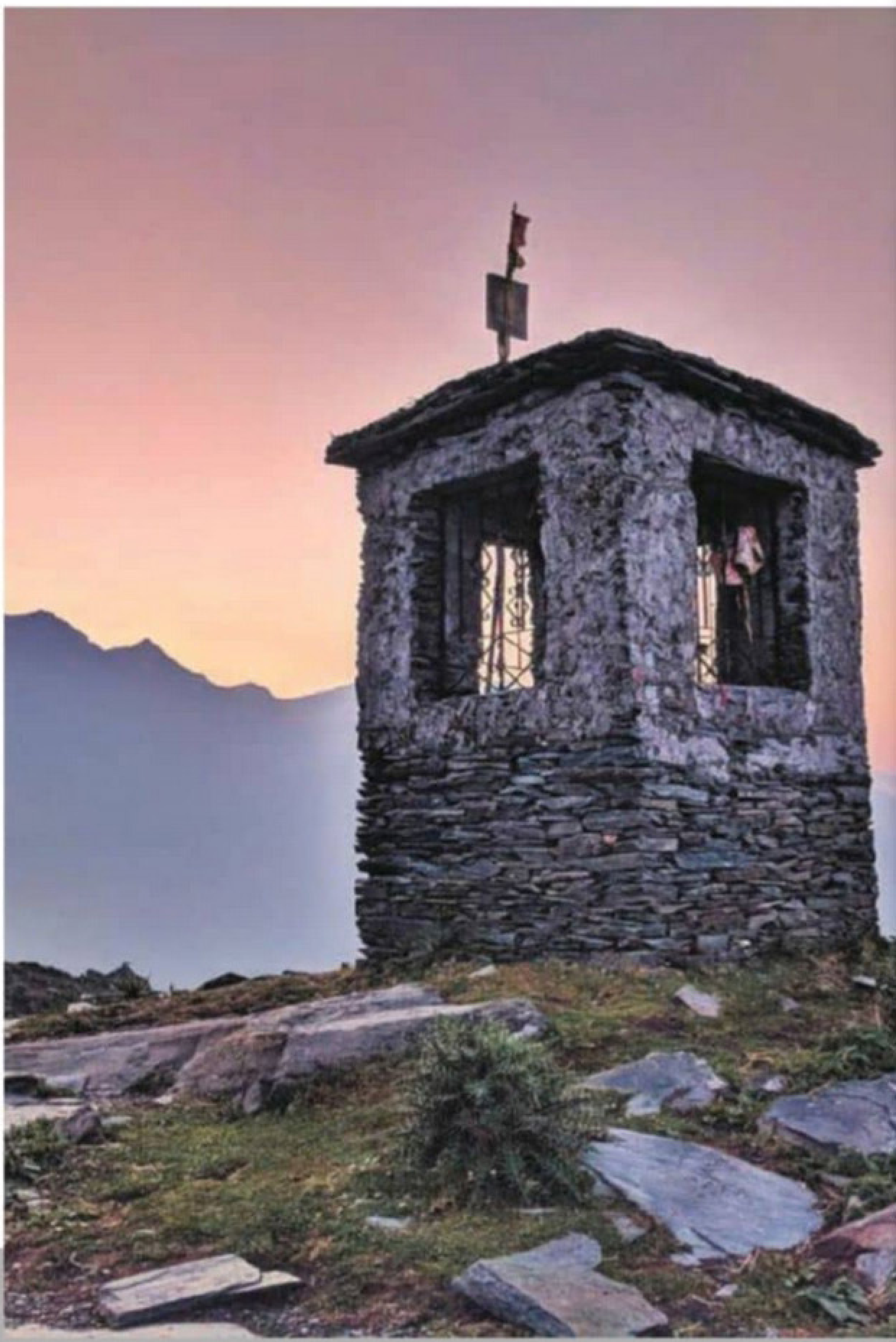
Of the 10,000 kilometres you covered, which stretch was the most challenging?

The real challenge was to find a ride... to find drivers who'd let me in on their journey. And this was particularly difficult along the National Highway 39. I had left Dimapur in Nagaland and was inching towards Imphal in Manipur, and very often, trucks here stayed off the roads because of bandhs. Given the region's sensitivity, there's a bandh once every six days. This highway is regarded as Manipur's lifeline. Trucks carrying supplies, mostly food items, are all neatly numbered, guarded by authorised government vehicles. The convoys are so large that you need to stand in one spot for 20 minutes to see the entire fleet pass by you, from the first vehicle to the last. It's quite an intimidating sight.

Which leg was the most stunning then?

The most beautiful stretch is actually not in the book. It was from Pathankot to Dharamshala. It was also the only time when, much to my horror, I encountered a driver who got behind the wheels after he had chugged

PKG PHOTOGRAPHY/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (TRUCK), PARDEEP SINGH GILL/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (PRAYER FLAGS)



THE TASTE OF *GOSHTABA*—A WHITE GRAVY STARRING GIANT MUTTON MEATBALLS— WHICH I RELISHED IN SRINAGAR, IS HARD TO FORGET

one too many beers at a dhaba in Pathankot. But I still remember how lush and green Kangra Valley looked that day, and those snow-capped mountains flanking us. The elevation here is unlike Kashmir's where the valleys are so steep that you can barely see what lies at the bottom of it all.

Part One ends with you drifting off to sleep in chilly Kashmir, finally relishing a night free of mosquitoes. What happened the next morning, and the next?

Well, I stayed in Srinagar, in a lodge in Lal Chowk. Besides visiting a few newspaper offices which are run out of really old, wooden buildings, some even scarily dilapidated, I visited a few tourist attractions, and ate a lot of food! I went to the famous Shankaracharya Temple that stands on a hill of the same name at an elevation of 1,100 feet, offering gorgeous views of almost all of Srinagar. It's here where Adi Shankaracharya is known to have meditated. I don't know why but I sat cross-legged in the temple complex, shut my eyes, and started to meditate. Just then a woman entered, saw me in that state, screamed the loudest scream I have ever heard, and ran for the door. I realised how long and unkempt my beard had grown.

I also did a darshan of the 15th-century Badshah Tomb where rests the mother of Sultan Zain-Ul-Abidin. Red, multi-domed, by the Jhelum... here a maulvi enlightened me on how Islam took root in Kashmir. The king proclaimed he'll adopt the religion of the person whose face he first sees in the morning. As hundreds queued up outside his durbar, through his chamber's window he happened to first lay his eyes on a whirling dervish on a distant mountaintop. He adopted Sufism.

Facing page: Rolling with the truckies (top) led the author to both lilac mountains (bottom right) and delicious coastal fare involving prawn, pork, beef (bottom left) and some mighty fine toddy.

DENISVOSTRIKOV/SHUTTERSTOCK (MAN), SANTHOSH VARGHESE/SHUTTERSTOCK (FOOD), SUBHAM MEHTA/EYEEM/GETTY IMAGES (MOUNTAIN)

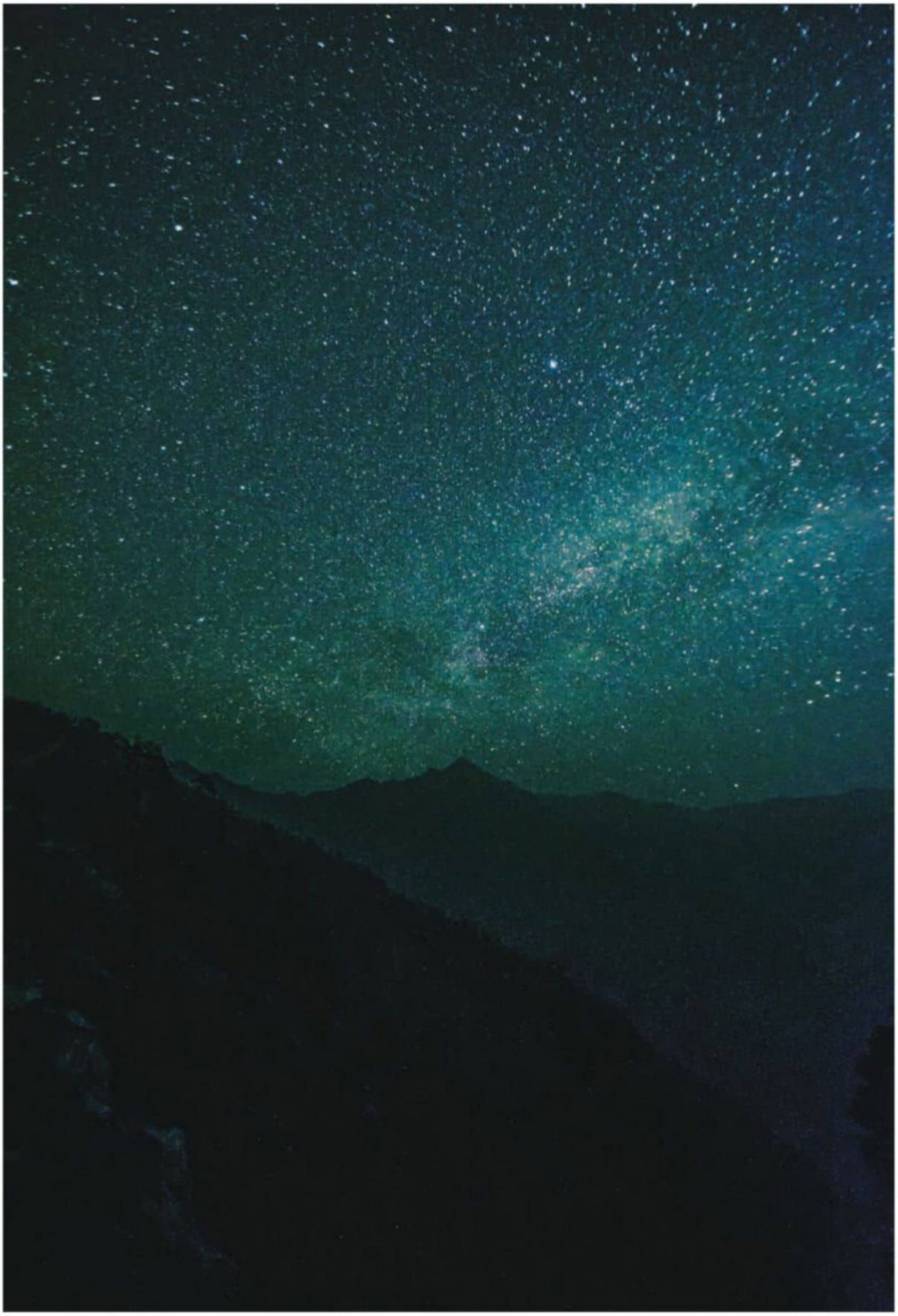
You said you ate a lot. Where did you go and what (all) did you eat?

The only sort of a "family restaurant" I ate at in Srinagar was an old haunt called Mughal Darbar. I tried a mini-Kashmiri thali which was simply delicious... flavoured rice and on it rested ghee-fried ribs, some mutton-fenugreek gravy, and a lone seekh kebab. The taste of *goshtaba* I relished there, a white gravy starring giant mutton meatballs, is hard to forget. Most days though I ate a plate of biryani at a small joint called Mummy Please in old Srinagar. Old Srinagar is a hub for roadside grills and kebabs... chicken seekhs, mutton kebabs, all for ₹50 a plate. And then there was this mutton samosa from a hole in the wall place. Only ₹20; it was pure brilliance.

The real challenge was to find alcohol in Kashmir, which, after some asking around, I learnt is sold in only two places: One inside the army cantonment and the other, a wine shop near Dal Lake. Drinking here is a social taboo. Smoking? A style statement of sorts. Local men seem to have taken it up with great panache! But I did get my dose in the army cantonment outside which enterprising folks stood selling yellow cloth bags for people to carry their haul home, attracting as little attention as possible. Here, a CRPF jawan and two Kashmiri youngsters sat hunched over one cell phone, united in their watching of a Dogri music video. Srinagar, at least at that time, felt like any other Indian town, except for the barbed wires.

On the subject of food, tell us about the other petrol pumps, those that fuel the drivers—the ubiquitous Indian dhabas.

Honestly, food in the North is all *dal makhni* and *aloo matar*. So the non-vegetarian in me appreciated the journeys I took along the highways of the Northeast and South India. Seafood restaurants along the Goa-Karnataka border serve great fare. In



Mountain mornings (facing page) and mountain nights (top) offered a natural balm for the travel-weary author.

AMAN ARORA/EYEEM/GETTY IMAGES (MOUNTAIN). PHOTO COURTESY: RAJAT UBHAYAKAR (MEN)

Kozhikode, I savoured a hefty portion of squid biryani at the iconic Paragon. But Andhra's Apollo Fish, a bite-sized, crunchy, boneless fish appetiser, sprinkled with chaat masala, was my ultimate favourite. It's like a plate piled with fish popcorn, for about ₹150 or so. I was so impressed with one dhaba in Naidupeta, about 50 kilometre from Nellore, that as soon as I was done with my meal, I marked it on Google Maps. Then, of course, the toddy shops in Kerala are epic—you get the best toddy in Kottayam and Kumarakom. In one toddy shop for ₹800 I had appetisers featuring duck, crab, fish, beef, pork, and prawns, surrounded by passionate locals discussing politics. One of the best times I had was in Nettoor Toddy Shop in Kochi, a relatively fancy, family-friendly toddy shop by the backwaters, reading *The Legends of Khasak*.

In the Northeast, the Bengali dhabas served unlimited fish and chicken thalis for just ₹110.

You mention how you wanted to see India with its warts and blemishes. Part Two starts on a dull day in Dimapur, and the lodge you check into. Tell us about your accommodation trials.

I had one rule of thumb: Nothing more than ₹500 a night. Max 600, if I really couldn't find anything. I couldn't have been possibly staying in three-stars and then hitchhiking with truck drivers the next morning—there's a lot of dissonances there. Most lodges maintained basic hygiene. But then there were places where you could tell the bedsheets haven't been washed for days. Tired from the hours on the road, I would then simply rip them off and pass out on the bare mattress. These were obviously non-AC rooms, and they did at times get oppressively hot. But it was manageable. I chose rooms from where I could look down onto the street and observe whatever it had to offer... liveliness, silence, a lot, or nothing at all.

Facing page: Little compares to sunsets seen from behind a truck's windshield (top), or the fullness of meals (bottom) savoured after a day on the road.

MOST LODGES MAINTAINED BASIC HYGIENE. BUT THEN THERE WERE PLACES WHERE THE BEDSHEETS HADN'T BEEN WASHED FOR DAYS

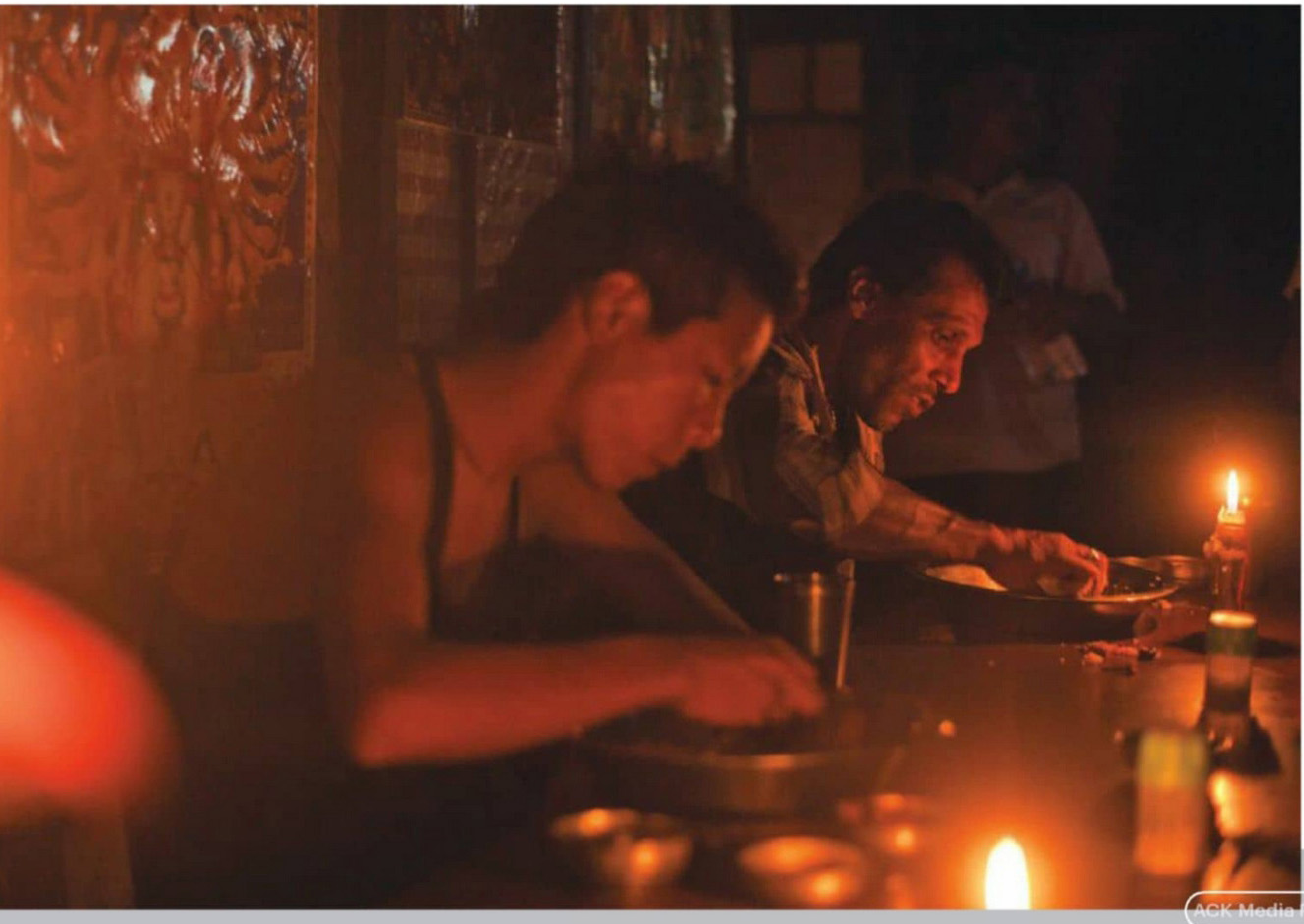
Off topic, what are some of your favourite travel destinations?

I like Nepal a lot. In my last year in college, I was in Pokhara with a few friends, hanging out with sadhus. We went to a restaurant and got chatting with the chef. It just so happened that by the time we left, the chef had volunteered to take us to the Annapurna Base Camp. We took off the next morning. Sharp 6 a.m. It took us three days to ascend and then we realised we had to return to college soon. Crazy as it sounds, we descended in a day, all thanks to our guide's ingenuity. When we were exhausted to a point where we couldn't lift a step, he made us stop at a village and chug rice beer. "See the energy you get after this," he had said. He was right!

I also really like the Ajanta caves. I remember climbing up a hill to see the caves' facade. It was simply mind-blowing to see Indian history, all the way back from 2nd and 1st centuries B.C., come alive so artistically on a wall.

In Maharashtra, Kaas Plateau is another favourite. While studying at a military school in Satara, I used to go cycling there with my friends, long before it became a social media sensation. Melghat Tiger Reserve, amidst the Satpura range, isn't as commercialised as other Maharashtrian attractions along the Western Ghats, and that's why I like it very much. Lot of natural rock formations. I remember staying in a government rest house that had hung a big Indira Gandhi photo to honour her one stray visit. Government properties are the best. Simple, yet full of character. They are always in the most strategic location, and offer clean rooms and decent food. This one, too, was super basic. Zero network. I was completely cut off. That's an ideal holiday for me. ▮

PHOTO COURTESY: RAJAT UBHAYAKAR



OFF COURSE IN CUBA

Saying yes to bright-eyed strangers and no to Caribbean clichés rewarded a traveller with an atypical intrigue

MUGDHA MAHALANABISH

Live music in Havana's many cafés and restaurants is a heady affair.

LENA WURM/SHUTTERSTOCK

I SCANNED THROUGH THE PAPER AND DIALLED THE DIGITS R HAD HASTILY SCRIBBLED ON THE NIGHT BEFORE. STALKING HIM ON SOCIAL MEDIA WAS OUT OF THE QUESTION. “THERE’S NO INTERNET IN CUBA!”

—I’d heard returning visitors exaggerate, submitting to a quirk that lines up with a Marxist-Leninist socialist state. The truth is that Internet access has historically been limited to centralised public spaces in the country and it was sometime last year that the government extended access to Cuban homes, albeit selectively. In short, looking for R, whom I had known for about a day, felt like a riddle.

The dial tone gave up for the third time. R was not to be reached.

We had been drinking at a nondescript bar somewhere in Central Havana when he’d playfully handed me his cell number. A karaoke session unfolded in the background, the singers attempting American pop songs. Fidel Castro’s dictionary would probably chalk it up as ‘Yankee Imperialism.’ “I do not approve of gringos telling Latin American Caribbean stories,” a dear Colombian friend had once told me. “Oh and please do not click pictures of riding one of those old classic cars, puffing on cigars,” he’d added for good measure.

Cuba is as arcane as it is iconic, and it is shrouded in the biases of a mainstream Western gaze. What one chooses to show about the country is thus political when presented to a world that largely associates it with cigars and wildly chromatic cars, a repressive socialist state, or a frenzied Cuban immigrant in the U.S. who goes by the name of Tony Montana (*Scarface*). Half a century of U.S. embargo had tried to keep Cuba isolated and economically challenged, yet it could not dampen the island’s vitality. It is this vitality that my friend had wished for me to explore.

“You visit my country and you don’t even say hi?” Those were R’s first words to me.

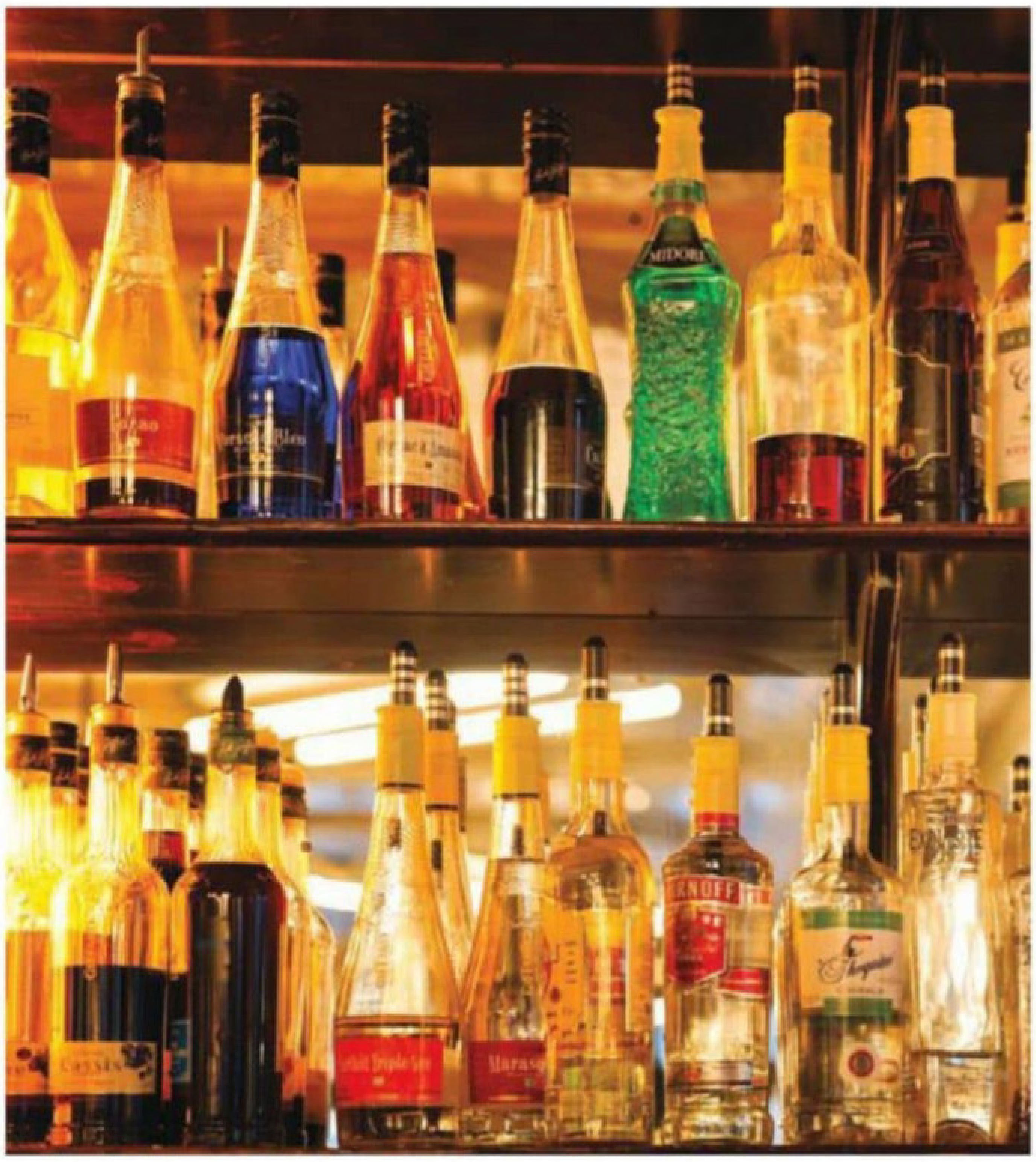
No, I won’t. That’s not how we roll with strangers in India, or in my hometown Calcutta. And back in New York City, where I now live, you’d need a lot more than that smile of yours to break through my self-absorption. That city has undone my Calcutta warmth.

But that’s not what I said. Breaking away from set ways, I smiled back. R clicked his tongue, and behind him Havana shut up. Over the next many hours, we would take long walks, stopping to sip on mojitos he’d never drink.

El Malecón, in particular, was begging for us to walk its eight-kilometre-long majestic promenade chasing the Atlantic. Construction of the seaside esplanade began in 1901 during Cuba’s temporary U.S. military rule. The idea was to protect Havana from invasion by sea,

Facing page: Plaza Vieja (top) in Old Havana is a cornucopia of vintage architecture; Stopping to sip on local liquor (bottom right) cooled off the author’s hot pursuit of Central Havana’s bustling lanes, esplanades and even barber shops (bottom left).

MAURIZIO DE MATTEI/SHUTTERSTOCK (PLAZA), AKTURER/SHUTTERSTOCK (MEN), CDRIN/SHUTTERSTOCK (BOTTLES)



> AT THIS BAR, I FELT GOOD ABOUT ROLLING SOLO. SITTING IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, HEARING A LANGUAGE I DID NOT UNDERSTAND, I FELT... ENDLESS

but over the ages locals have lent this seawall an intimate grammar. Friends, lovers, vendors selling plastic flowers, and musicians crooning hearty renditions of Compay Segundo's "Chan chan" throng as the sunset turns the Atlantic silver. Only the fishermen remain still, hands steady on their fishing rods. And on days when the tide is rough, walkers simmer down with sprays of water from a raving ocean that splish-splashes with no expected syntax.

Even with R by my side, I was acutely aware of the old buildings in Moorish, Cuban baroque and Neoclassical styles that circle the streets opposite the promenade, whispering of Cuba's colonial past. And against such grand indulgence, abstinent Soviet-style blocks stand as reminders of the revolution that followed. So later that night when R took me to a dive bar whose facade showed none of that architectural brilliance, I felt underwhelmed. But his company was golden and we made plans to see each other again, once I was back from Trinidad, a town 300 kilometres southeast of Havana. There was one more day in between, but that was for myself.

***

Come morning, I set out to explore the neighbourhood of Paseo Marti where Paseo Del Prado, an esplanade dividing Old Havana from Central Havana, struck me as particularly zippy. Open-air salsa classes and artists displaying their artwork occupy the thoroughfare. But all that dulled once a dozen kids came out to play, passing around a beaten white football, drunk on the game. For an average Calcuttan, this hit

From strangers weaving in and out of her story to music by the Malecón (facing page top), Havana (facing page bottom, bottom) for the author was a delirious dream in pop colours.

ANNA JEDYNAK/SHUTTERSTOCK (WOMAN).
FACING PAGE: MARCIN JUCHA/SHUTTERSTOCK (MUSICIANS), KAMIRA/SHUTTERSTOCK (STREET)

too close to home. Home is also what I found in Central Havana, where I felt the humidity, chatter, and frenzy of North Calcutta streets landing thick on my senses. The tall windows and the amber hues of buildings felt like a sepia-tinted throwback of the city I had left but never left behind.

I continued to walk until I walked straight into a bar inside a neighbourhood held together by narrow, serpentine lanes. The absence of cocktails on a menu scribbled across a wall told me that the joint doesn't care for tourists. I cooled off with a beer that turned warm within minutes of arriving. Hinged to its side was a barber shop where a man worked expertly through his customer's hair. The bar lady and I managed a few pleasantries through my barely-there Spanish and her broken English. Two men next to me were sharing some joke that I unwittingly smiled at, and they nodded at me having a good time. At this bar, in the neighbourhood I wish I remembered the name of, I felt good about taking a break from R's company to roll solo. Sitting in the middle of nowhere, hearing a language I did not understand, I felt... endless.

It is only later when I started heading back towards the Malecón when it began, the pang. I hadn't anticipated the heavy loneliness of dusk in Havana. My phone carrier had no roaming service so there I was at a fancy hotel in downtown Havana that I could not afford, but where the kind receptionist allowed me three trials on his desk phone.

But the dial tone gave up.

Retracing the spots R had taken me the previous night felt like the logical thing to do. I found myself back in the old town square, Plaza Vieja, nestled in the centre of Old Havana. Vintage buildings of the Cuban baroque and 20th century art-nouveau persuasions had been turned into cafés and restaurants. During the day older joints host live performances by local musicians and yes, the song "Guantanamera" is a staple. At night more upscale and modern cafés sometimes blast Taylor Swift on their stereos. I realised that this uneven entry of capitalism into a socialist state is what makes Havana a bundle of contradictions.

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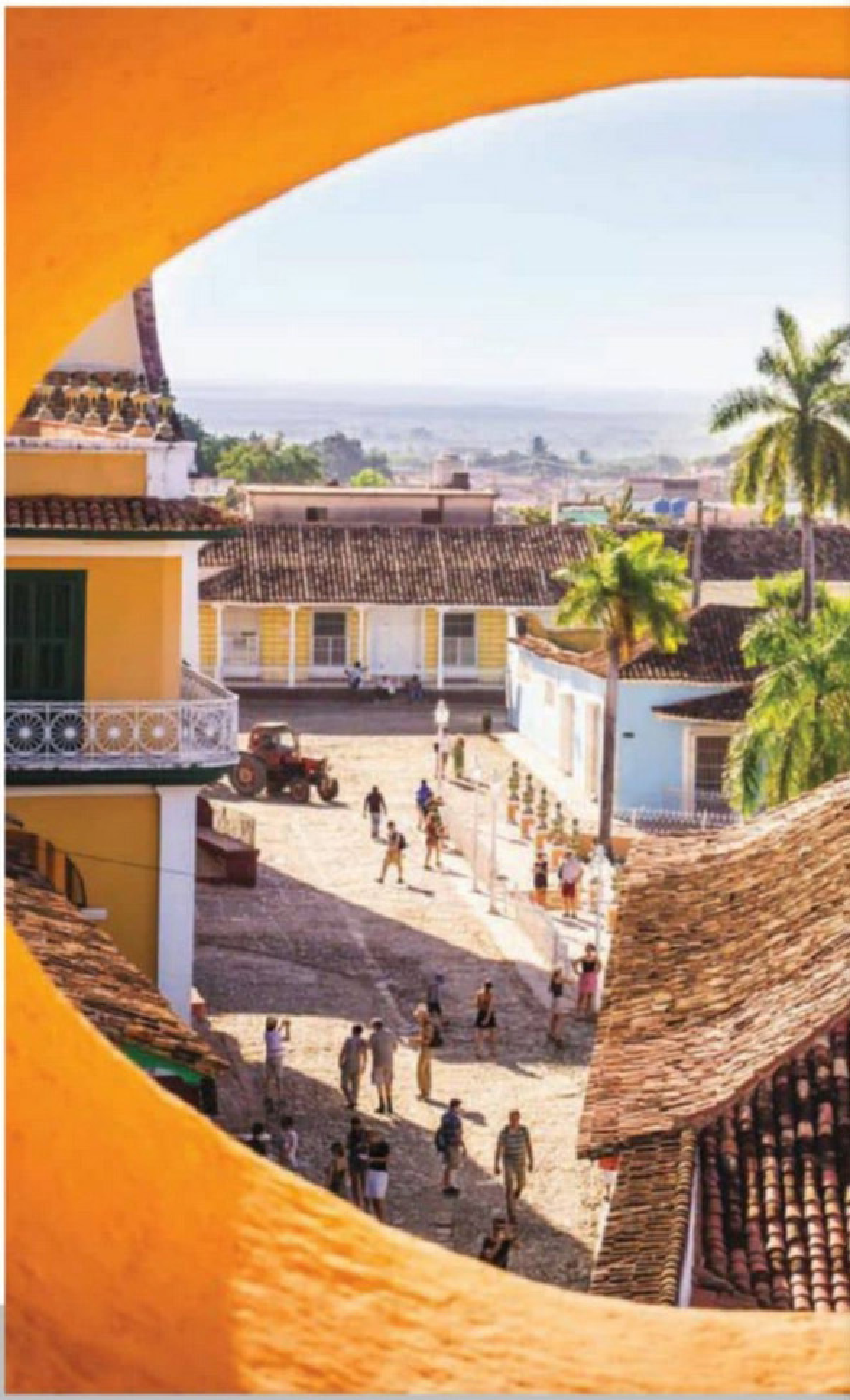
A few kilometres outside of Trinidad, vast fields of sugarcane outline either side of the road, a nod to Cuba's agricultural economy and the town's soft-pastel charm. My six-hour-long bus ride to the UNESCO World Heritage started to feel fruitful.

In Trinidad's central square lies Casa De La Musica, where locals and tourists alike salsa to live music every night. Even with no chops, a stranger-turned-dance partner ensured that I felt invincible on the open floor. You will never not catch music in Trinidad, unless it's the dead of the night. Nearly all its bars boast pavilions for jams laidback or electric. Three days went by in an instant, yet I found enough time for inaction, spending drowsy afternoons melting in the island's heat after hearty meals of fried plantains, rice and peas, and the fresh catch of the day. I even tried my luck with Cuban pizza. A mobile stall cooked



Cobbled streets (top) and the sweet motion of local life (facing page) gives Trinidad (bottom) a soft-pastel charm.

AKTURER/SHUTTERSTOCK (BOYS)
FACING PAGE: DOLEESI/SHUTTERSTOCK (HORSE CART), JULIAN PETERS PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK (STREET).

up a storm with dough, cheese, Jamón—cured ham—and chunks of pineapple. Sweet, sour and crunchy. The final result might have assaulted an Italian but my insides were euphoric.

I considered extending my stay in Trinidad but the logistics overwhelmed me. My mind drifted to R. Had he given me the wonky number on purpose? I never asked, but I saw R again. Exactly where we had first met, I found R waving at me when I returned to Havana. No last minute jitters or (failed) phone calls this time. We just met, and resumed our walk.

EPILOGUE

It is said that between 1992 and 1997 Cubans seen with tourists in the streets could be de facto outlawed by the state. Whether that was a system of social control or the state's measure to protect tourists is a debate for another day.

For my part, I sauntered through the Museo de la Revolución on my last day, learning and unlearning the history of the Cuban Revolution. Inside the museum, a dizzying multitude of photographs, ammunition, and secret letters retell a story that the West will never narrate.

By the Atlantic where I had first met R, I made two choices. To go where my instincts take me. And to not, despite those instincts, ride a classic Cuban car while puffing on a cigar—like my Colombian friend had asked of me. ▮

BEST FLASHBACK **TRAVEL MEMORIES**

From scenic mornings by the lake in Myanmar to friendly snowball fights in Gulmarg, readers sent in photographs of the last trip they took before the COVID-19 lockdown in India. Here are our top picks.

1st

2nd

3rd

1 At the crack of dawn, fishermen circle around Taungthaman Lake in Myanmar to bait the day's fresh catch. Vlad Kutsey visited Mandalay in February and captured the drone shot as the fisherman cast his net over the cocktail-hued waters.

2 A visit to Gulmarg's Drung village in the winter months before the lockdown afforded Debmalya Das and his family many memorable anecdotes, which included a friendly snowball fight between his brother and a group of excited kids.

3 One February evening, Santanu Gupta found himself at a beach in Kannur where two young men indulged in Kalaripayattu—Kerala's mixed martial art form. The mesmerising sight went on to become a cherished memory from his trip.

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